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The CONQUEROR

from a Dying Kingdom



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Chapter 1 — The Academy Togi Tournament

Having reached the age of sixteen, I was now treated as a “mature” student at the academy. That came with a bunch of new responsibilities.

Although such expectations might’ve sounded like a pain, students who took their studies seriously already had most of the credits they needed anyway. The crowded timetables we’d all started with were becoming increasingly empty, and a growing number of students in my year were looking for new ways to enjoy their free time on weekdays.

Two things in particular that were new to us as mature students were the Academy Togi Tournament and the Knight Academy Combat Tournament.

The latter was a contest where we’d fight to be recognized as the strongest in the Knight Academy—similar to the World Martial Arts Tournament from a certain shonen manga. Two students between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five were to be selected, then pitted against each other for the main event. But it would be a shame if it all ended with just one fight, so another ten or so exceptional students would also be chosen to provide some entertainment before the big showdown.

Knights considered it a great honor to compete in the tournament, so anyone around the age of twenty with a passion for martial arts would train intensely during the summer season.

But since sixteen-year-olds like us stood no chance of being chosen, the combat tournament’s approach didn’t have much of an effect on the dorm’s atmosphere...to say nothing of someone like me, who wasn’t interested in the first place.

The Academy Togi Tournament was an event that both halves of the academy took part in, although it was a much bigger deal for the Cultural Academy. It tended to play out like a contest between the two schools. Here, on the Knight Academy side, we had to put forward eight students between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three—one from each dormitory. The upper age limit of

twenty-three was because the number of suitable candidates in a year group dwindled as the students passed the age of twenty and began to graduate.

Though our dorm wouldn't be involved in the combat tournament, we did have to pick someone to compete in the togi tournament. Consequently, there were games going on in the dorm everywhere I looked lately.

Not everyone was into togi, but as a regular player, I couldn't help but get caught up in it all. Myalo and I were considered the two strongest players in the dorm, after all. There was no way I could simply refuse to represent us in the tournament.

It was up to each individual dorm to decide how they'd pick their representative. In ours, the most passionate players had held a meeting where it was decided that our representative should be chosen by holding our own togi league. Neither Myalo nor I lost a single one of those games because none of the other players there even compared to us.

I'd felt like telling everyone that we could settle the matter much quicker if I'd faced Myalo right from the start, but I didn't want to be a killjoy when the selection process was all part of the fun for everyone else.

So anyhow, it had all come down to a final game between me and Myalo.

"Let's do this," I said as I rubbed my hands together.

"Let me just say one thing first, Yuri."

"Hm?"

"I've no intention of losing this battle."

Myalo sounded surprisingly determined, but that was just what I'd been hoping for.

"Oh yeah? Then let's both give it our best," I replied.

"If you're ready, I'll roll first." She threw down the die and rolled a six.

"A six? That's bad news for me," I said.

Whoever rolled highest would have the first move, which gave a very slight advantage in togi.

I rolled next, and the die landed on two.

“How unfortunate,” Myalo said.

“Sure is.”

I was secretly pleased, since I was planning to throw the game. I was busy enough already without being forced to play in tournaments. The score on the die didn’t determine who won, but it put me at a disadvantage nonetheless.

My togi skills were too well known in the dorm to simply step down or lose a bunch of league games, but no one would be surprised if I lost to Myalo. Even if I lost here because of a stupid move, the two of us were so far beyond everyone else that they’d never notice.

“Let’s begin.” Myalo picked up one of her spear bearers at the edge of the board and moved it forward.

Huh?

The game’s pieces included plainrunners and kingeagles that were similar to shogi’s rooks and bishops. At the start of a game, plainrunners couldn’t move forward because they were behind pieces known as spears that could only move forward, similarly to pawns in shogi or chess.

But unlike shogi, togi didn’t have bear-in-the-hole or any other strategies for instantly developing a castle, so the standard openings involved moving a kingeagle or clearing a path forward for a plainrunner.

Moving a spear at the board’s edge was such a poor move that no one ever did it. It brought back some nice memories of shogi played by the light of the moon in a manga that focused on edge pawns, but I couldn’t understand why she’d done it.

After thinking for a moment, I moved a spear to make way for a plainrunner.



I needed a way to lose convincingly. I couldn’t just put my hand on the board and say “I concede” in the current circumstances. If I were to quit while I was clearly winning, I’d be forced to explain to everyone around us how exactly I expected Myalo to put me in checkmate.

I didn't want to be put in that position. I couldn't let my loss be too far-fetched in the eyes of our dorm mates.

I'd decided early on that a convincing loss to Myalo was the best way to get out of the tournament, but she was using every ounce of her ingenuity to stop me from creating a situation where I could sensibly concede.

To anyone watching, we must have looked like beginners who barely knew the rules, but Myalo and I had both used some incredible tricks against each other throughout this game.

I don't wanna. I don't wanna. I don't wanna play in the tournament.

Myalo was as persistent as she was meticulous. She showed an impressive level of foresight and composure even as we put into play strategies radically different from anything we'd used before. Her ingenuity had impressed me so much that I began to feel this was a real contest—so much so that I felt like I'd be disrespecting her if I didn't keep making a serious effort to lose.

This went on for twice as long as an average game. It wasn't until we'd played an unprecedented 230 moves that a very obvious checkmate-in-three presented itself.

Naturally, I was the one who had the opportunity to checkmate my opponent.

It was so obvious that not just Carol, but even Dolla could see it. I saw him screw up his face as he studied the board, using the full power of his tiny brain to analyze the game. Finally, he nodded, looking pleased with himself.

I've lost. I resigned myself to this strange sort of defeat and made the obvious move that would lead to a checkmate.

Myalo's reaction was immediate. "I concede."

Her resolve had proved stronger than mine. She'd been determined to lose right from the start. I'd spent the first few moves thinking that Myalo was playing seriously. She probably had the better of me from the moment I made that mistake.

I broke into an unrealistic coughing fit. "I—ahem—feel ill all of a sudden. Guess I'd better rest tomorrow."

That was when the main event would begin at the royal castle.

“Oh, I’m quite sure you won’t be resting tomorrow,” Myalo said with a smirk.

“Were you that desperate to get out of it?”

That was where I’d misread the situation. Myalo loved togi so much that I never guessed she might want to get out of the tournament.

She must’ve spent a week studying techniques for losing the game we just played. I’d come to realize it halfway through our match. She’d made several moves that weren’t just clever; they had to be the result of her putting serious thought into the problem. It wasn’t like she was having flashes of inspiration—her methods felt tried and tested. It would’ve been less effort for her to just play the tournament.

If she wanted me to win that badly, why didn’t she just throw some other games before we even played? I wondered. Ah, but then I might’ve thrown my games to compensate.

However our cat-and-mouse game had gone, it was always going to come down to this.

“I know you’ll make a good showing, Yuri. I look forward to seeing it.” Myalo smiled at me once more, without a hint of malice.

“I’d started thinking I was getting good at togi lately.” As always, Carol was on hand to offer a below-average player’s analysis of the game. “But I couldn’t get my head around that game. It was like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

Hopefully she never gets her head around it, or she’ll probably punch me.

The two of us were so much more advanced than everyone else that no one dared question our moves.



The tournament began at the royal castle the next day. It should’ve been my day off, but here I was, sitting before an audience.

This was all Myalo’s fault. She didn’t lose fairly.

“Without further ado, let us begin the annual Academy Togi Tournament for

the year 2316! Please give our players from the academy the warm-hearted applause they deserve!”

The spectators began clapping as soon as the female facilitator had stopped speaking.

It was a smaller crowd than I’d expected. There were only about five hundred people here. We were playing in the same large castle hall that was used for academy admission ceremonies, so there was still a lot of empty space toward the back.

Most of the spectators were academy students here to cheer on their friends, while the adults were probably just togi fans with nothing better to do.

Today’s games obviously weren’t considered very important. The main focus would be tomorrow’s final, rather than today’s early rounds.

“You’ve each been seated by the first contestant that you’ll be facing,” the moderator told us.

I’d wondered why our seats were arranged this way, but now I understood.

We were sitting so that there was a girl on either side of each boy, and vice versa. At first, I’d been wondering if I’d wandered into some sort of dating event by mistake. The early rounds were set up so that every game was between a Knight Academy student and a Cultural Academy student, as if our two schools were here to fight it out.

We’d been asked in advance to put forward eight Knight Academy students, each chosen from the eight dorms. Likewise, the Cultural Academy put forward eight contestants, but they only had two dormitories—Blue Cat Dormitory for the boys and the White Birch Dormitory for the girls—so they must’ve chosen differently. That being said, I couldn’t see any male players here to represent the Cultural Academy.

I didn’t know exactly how they’d chosen, but all of their players looked older than me. White Birch wasn’t segregated according to age, so they might’ve been chosen based on skill alone. It was like the selection process had been designed to put us at a disadvantage.

Since togi was a battle of wits, it didn’t favor older students quite so much as

a martial arts tournament, but it still gave them an advantage. Forcing the Knight Academy to choose students from different age groups would mean the Cultural Academy players were better on average. The tournament structure would ensure that the academy's most skilled player won in the end anyway, but it still felt unfair.

Four togi boards were neatly arranged in the hall where eight of the contestants would play four games in the first half of the first round. The remaining contestants, me included, would wait before playing another four games in the second half.

I entered a waiting room separated from the hall and found that I had it to myself. The other players must've been sitting with the spectators and studying the ongoing games. It was lucky for me, because now I could sleep here on the fine sofa.

I'd napped for almost an hour when someone woke me up. It appeared to be a member of the event staff.

"You're Yuri, I believe? The first games have concluded. Please wake up."

"All right," I said.

Oh well, here goes.

I followed behind the employee and reentered the hall.

"Please let us through; he's a competitor."

The crowd made way for us as we moved toward the togi boards. Once we'd made it through, the staff member removed a rope that had been supported by two posts to form a simple waist-high barrier.

"Please go on ahead," she said.

Since I'd come this far, I figured I'd better start taking things seriously. I'd hoped to avoid the hassle of the event, but it wouldn't kill me to take part. I was carrying my dorm's reputation on my shoulders too.

My opponent was an adult woman who was already sitting down. She stood up to greet me as I approached and gripped her Cultural Academy skirt with both hands to give me a curtsy.

“Let’s make it a good, fair game.”

I guessed she was a little over twenty.

“Likewise.” I returned her greeting with an everyday bow.

As I took my seat, the girls standing behind my opponent were shouting things like “You can do it!” in high-pitched voices. My opponent smiled in response and turned to wave at the girls.

I was vaguely aware of similar cheers being aimed at me, but those were all gruff male voices that I could’ve done without.

After we’d both rolled the die, it was decided that she’d go first.

After just four moves that each made a sharp clack against the board, I was certain that she was using an opening known as Horned Spear Wall. Much like Climbing Silver in shogi, this was a common opening that even a beginner could use if they had the first move.

Her spears and a chariot combined to create a formation that she could use offensively, while also attacking with her plainrunners and kingeagles. Spears and chariots complemented each other so well that advancing them together was a sensible strategy that made them difficult to break apart.

But various countermeasures had been devised for that very reason, and it was easy to see it coming because it required that pawns be moved in a very specific way during the opening. When up against an expert player, it was actually quite a weak strategy in practice.

Horned Spear Wall was a familiar sight to me because Carol was one of its most devout practitioners. She used it whenever she moved first, like she knew no other way to play, and as a below-average player, she applied it with no ingenuity. I couldn’t remember my opponent’s name, but she had to be better than Carol or she wouldn’t be here. Indeed, she wielded this tried-and-tested strategy against me with some skill.

Nonetheless, once the game was over—or as good as over in my mind, at least—I was left thinking, *Wait, was that it?* She was nothing compared to Myalo.

Still, the game hadn't officially ended, and she continued to stubbornly play on, conscious of her inferiority but undaunted by it. Unless I was mistaken, it was already too late for her to escape checkmate. I'd have her king trapped in just five moves. If she saw that coming, I'd have her in seven.

My opponent thought long and hard each time she took her turn; there didn't appear to be anyone timing the game. After thinking for about ten minutes, she chose a move that left me with just the seven-step checkmate.

I responded quickly, and then she saw the trap.

"I concede." In her frustration, she hung her head. Then she began to sob, tears streaming down her face.

The friends who'd been cheering her on crossed over the barrier so that they could come console her. They patted her back and shoulders.

With sixteen players in the tournament, the final winner would be decided in four rounds. The first three of those rounds were happening today, with the final scheduled for tomorrow.



When it came time to play my second game, the opponent I faced was no more skilled than my first.

"I concede," she said after I'd made the final move. "Heh heh. You certainly didn't go easy on me... You're as merciless as you look."

Rather than showing any frustration, this opponent simply left the table after making that inexplicable remark.

I'd qualified for the semifinal with little effort.

"I hope we can enjoy a good fair game."

"Likewise," I replied.

My final opponent for the day was, once again, female. This one seemed more composed and refined than the other two.

Three girls in a row? What happened to all the Knight Academy boys?

She rolled the die without saying anything more. I did the same. A four was

followed by a six, giving me the first move.

“If you’re ready, I’ll begin,” I said.

“By all means.”

I made my first move.

Some time later, we were in the middle game. All other thoughts were gone from my mind. My opponent was so strong that I needed absolute focus. Her skill was equal to mine.

Before entering the middle game, she’d deliberately employed an opening that didn’t put either of us at a particular advantage, but threw my own attempt at an opening into disarray. As a result, the board was looking chaotic, even though we’d played so many moves we’d normally have reached the endgame.

It was still impossible to guess who would win. Though she’d thwarted everything I’d tried against her, she’d sacrificed almost as much material as I’d lost in the process.

In terms of pieces, she was ahead, but she’d lost a plainrunner along with some others needed to build offensive formations. The loss had robbed her attacks of momentum.

I picked up one of my key pieces, then placed it back down loudly as I made my move.

“You’re quick,” she said.

When a game had no time limit, a player who moved too quickly either wasn’t taking their opponent seriously, or was trying to pressure them. But I had paused. I was careful to spend long enough between moves to avoid appearing disrespectful.

“My father taught me that it’s bad manners to make a lady wait.”

He’d never told me anything like that, but it felt like a safe response.

“I see. I appreciate the thought.”

“I hope I haven’t offended you.”

“I didn’t mean to criticize. It’s just that you must’ve predicted how I’d move. I’m feeling less confident as a result.”

It was just as she said—I was quick because I’d been able to guess what she’d do. If she’d taken me by surprise, I would’ve needed time to reassess the game.

When there was a clock ticking down, it was often necessary to move without considering whether better options existed, but that wasn’t the case here. Basically, I’d been able to respond so quickly because, while she’d been considering what to do, I’d been thinking of potential countermeasures to her movements.

To put it another way, the only reason I hadn’t needed any time to think was because my opponent had spent so long mulling things over herself.

Games against Myalo never took much time. We both tended to act so quickly that we couldn’t finish thinking before the opponent made their next move.

“In my mind, I’m actually groaning at each move you make,” I confessed. “It’s fortunate that it doesn’t show on my face.”

“Are you now?”

I was taking the game seriously, but at the same time, I could relax somewhat because I wouldn’t have minded at all if I lost.



“I concede.”

Exhaustion washed over me the moment she said it.

“Thank you,” I said.

It had been a long time since I’d had to think so hard to corner an opponent.

“No, thank you,” she replied. “That was a fun game.”

She rose from her seat as soon as we’d thanked one another. Meanwhile, I was so mentally exhausted that I couldn’t even stand up.

“I’m glad to hear it...”

“Now, as much as I hate to leave you, I must excuse myself.”

My unknown opponent disappeared into the crowd of spectators.

Since the day was growing late, I decided I'd also leave after a short rest.

"Nice work, Yuri," a familiar voice called out behind me.

Myalo was there on the other side of the barrier.

"You were watching?"

"It was the semifinal. We all came along to support you."

I took a good look around and realized that Carol was there too.

The audience included a good number of students in the Knight Academy uniform, familiar and unfamiliar faces alike.

I suppose the semifinal is a big deal.

My opponent had plenty of supporters too, but it looked like I had more. The Knight Academy must've had high hopes for me now that I'd gotten this far.

"You guys need lives," I joked.

"I did it all so I could watch your big moment," Myalo said.

By "it all," I assumed she was referring to the togi game she'd deliberately lost the day before. Apparently, it wasn't because she couldn't be bothered or had somewhere else to be.

Next came Carol. "Congrats." She'd been watching from just behind the barrier.

This is all so over the top. But with a crowd this size watching us, I guess I'll have to pay her some respect. After all, I was the eldest son from a chieftain family, and Carol the first princess of the kingdom. Since there were more strangers watching us than acquaintances, the situation called for some formality.

I rose to my feet. As I approached Carol, she held out her hand as she'd no doubt done countless times before.

"I owe you my gratitude, Your Highness."

I crouched down on one knee, took her hand, and kissed it from across the

barrier.

By the time I'd released it and gotten to my feet, Carol's expression was some unreadable combination of anger and shock.

Wait. Isn't that what she wanted when she put out her hand?

"M-My pleasure..." With this odd choice of words, Carol turned her back to me and walked off somewhere.

Come to think of it, we're in Carol's home right now.

"Pfft... Hah..." Myalo laughed.

"What's so funny?" I asked her.

"N-Nothing... Pfft. It's just... Hah... She held out her hand because she wanted to pat your shoulder."

"Oh... That's what it was."

Awkward. No wonder she didn't know how to react. I kissed her hand while she was trying to pat my shoulder.

Fortunately, my gesture wasn't particularly unusual in our society.

Since no particular ceremony followed the games, I left the castle soon after they'd finished.

Once I was outside, I found that night had already fallen. There were several high-class coaches parked out front, ready to pick up groups of students like an academy bus service. Rather than board one of those, I accepted an offer from Myalo to ride the black carriage that she'd come in. It must've set out from the Gudinveil residence.

"They say that the opponent you just faced is the best player of her generation," Myalo said once we'd settled inside. "But I knew you'd win."

The carriage shook horribly on the stone cobbles, but we could still talk normally thanks to the soft seats beneath us.

"You mean the best in a generation of student amateurs," I replied.

I knew there were countless adults who played better. Similarly to shogi, a student who came first in a school togi tournament was just another amateur in

the eyes of a professional player. A hobbyist like me wouldn't even compare. To get to their level, I'd have to dedicate my life to the game.

"Well, yes, but even so..."

"I won't deny that she was good though. I'm not confident I'd win if we ever played again."

"Oh, of course. You wouldn't beat her a hundred times in a row."

"Still, she wasn't as good as you."

She was a strong player, but still much easier to deal with than Myalo. From the opening and well into the middle game, my opponent had challenged me, frustrated me, and upset my plans, but I never once felt like she'd stolen the initiative.

When I played Myalo, however, I always had to see through multiple layers of deception or she'd fool me into thinking I had the initiative when actually it belonged to her.

"It's strange how much more motivated I feel when you say such things," Myalo said. It was too dark to see her face clearly, but I could tell she was smiling.

"Don't get too motivated. If you get any better at togi, I'm going to have a tough time playing against you."

"I wasn't talking about togi. You know how to enthrall people, and I'm not immune."

What does that even mean?

"Do I...? Oh, could you drop me off near here?"

"Here? Are you resting at your family's home tonight?"

The carriage was close to the road that led to the Ho residence. But I wouldn't find Rook or Suzuya there, so there was no reason to visit.

"No, just some company business to sort out."

"Ah."

That didn't mean I was going to the waterwheel. Ho Company was now

renting a large storehouse-cum-office building across the street from my family's residence.

After Myalo opened the partition separating us from the driver and gave them an instruction to stop, the carriage quickly came to a halt.

I opened the door and stepped down onto the cobbles.

"You'll be staying at the dorm tonight, won't you?" Myalo asked.

"That's the plan."

"Then I'll wait for you here."

"You're sure?"

She doesn't need to sit here waiting on me.

"If you think you'll be gone half the night, I might reconsider."

"I'm just giving someone a message. It'll only take a minute."

I made sure to be quick. I hurried into the company building and gave the message to the first person I encountered, who happened to be Beaule, before returning to the carriage.

Once we were back at the dorm, we found a gathering of unfamiliar students sitting in the dining hall. Judging by their size, they were older than us.

There was no rule against older students going into a younger students' dorm building, but it rarely happened.

"Here he comes," a muscular older boy said as he spotted me.

The others had their backs to me, but now they all turned to look at my face.

One, two, three...seven of them? Ah, I see.

I recognized them as the fellow contestants from today's event. I also recalled three of the seven from lectures and training sessions, though I didn't know their names.

A nerdy-looking boy beckoned me over. "Over here. Sit down."

Do I get a chance to say no? And why do they all smell like booze? Do they think our dorm's a good place to drink? I won't blame them for losing their

games, but it's no reason to drown their sorrows here.

I walked over and greeted them. "Um... Hello. I'm Yuri."

"I'll bet you're tired. We aren't troubling you, are we?" the muscular boy asked.

Yeah, you are.

I definitely was tired, and this looked like some kind of after-work drinking session that I really didn't want to be dragged into.

"I'm hungry because I didn't get a chance to eat dinner yet," I said.

"Then why don't we head out somewhere?" he suggested.

Give me a break.

"Sorry, is there some sort of occasion?"

"We're celebrating your victory," the nerdy boy said.

A victory celebration?

"Isn't it a little soon?"

They mustn't have much ambition if they want to celebrate already. They should be thinking about tomorrow's final.

"Maybe you weren't aware, but you beat Lyrica Kuclillison today. She was the reigning champion for three years running. We might as well declare you the champion now."

I hadn't realized my opponent was such a big shot. No wonder she'd played so well. But if she qualified for a fearsome opponent, then there were two fearsome players in this dorm alone. That was a little odd, especially given that Myalo was even slightly better than me based on our history of wins and losses.

"Even so, I'd rather not take it for granted. I'll have to turn down the invitation to celebrate."

There was also my rule about not drinking until I turned twenty.

"Good attitude you've got," the muscular boy replied. "And I should hope so too."

What's up with him? He's talking down to me without a second thought.

Lording over everyone came naturally to people of high birth. I wondered if he was someone special. I'd actually fought him numerous times with swords and spears, but I couldn't remember his name.

"Let me tell you about tomorrow's opponent," the nerdy boy said.

No harm in hearing him out, I suppose.

"Tomorrow, you'll face a woman named Julia Lacramanus."

"So I've heard."

Myalo had let me know that Julia had won her third game shortly after I'd won mine, making her my opponent in the final.

I'd be playing against someone from the very Lacramanus family that was always finding ways to make things difficult for Ho Company.

Why her, of all people? was my first thought. If only I'd paid attention to the other games, I might've avoided going against her.

"Right. She's like the head's first granddaughter," the muscular boy explained. "The eldest daughter of the head's eldest daughter, that is."

She'd normally be next in line after the successor—her mother—to the current head of family. But it could be difficult to keep a family in order if the headship changed hands too frequently, so it wasn't uncommon for a witch family to skip a generation by having one of the head's granddaughters take over.

Knowledge like this was useful in the business world, and Myalo had informed me of the situation down to the fine details.

There was every possibility that Julia Lacramanus would be next in line for the family headship with her mother being skipped over. Then again, that was assuming that Julia proved herself worthy.

Age didn't always determine which child became the successor in a witch family. The real decider was the level of ability a would-be head displayed. If the eldest daughter was incompetent, the second eldest was chosen instead.

However, an eldest daughter might have a daughter of their own before any succession could occur, and that daughter might be exceptional, allowing succession to continue down the eldest line by skipping to the grandchild.

Such changes happened at the discretion of the witch family's head, and their wishes were always written down somewhere in case they succumbed to some fatal accident.

But most people weren't aware of all this, and assumed that Julia would be the head after next unless she proved completely incompetent.

I knew a lot about Julia Lacramanus.

She was a good-looking woman of twenty-two who led the second-largest student clique in White Birch Dormitory.

Her mother had shown a lack of talent while managing the parchment guild, and then again with several other guilds that formed part of the family's business.

Given Julia's mother's age and her high birth, she'd normally be overseeing numerous important guilds by this point. Not only was that not the case, she'd even resigned several years ago from the first post she'd been assigned to upon graduating from the Cultural Academy. According to Myalo, there was no extenuating circumstance behind it; she just wasn't capable of the job she'd been given. In other words, she was incompetent.

Julia's mother also had two sisters, but they too had failed to hold together the organizations they'd been given control of.

All three sisters had graduated from the Cultural Academy at the age of twenty-five. That was pushing it, considering that a smart girl who put the effort in could graduate around the age of seventeen.

This all meant that the head of the Lacramanus family had to be occupying numerous important posts herself.

These rumors about the lack of talent within the family were borne out by its failure to maintain a grip on its territory.

"Her favorite strategies if she gets the first move are Horned Pinwheel, Jamiko

Siege, and Kingeagle-Exchange Spear Placement. She usually opens with a Horned Pinwheel, then develops it into a Spear Push. If she moves second, she uses a Higg's Spear Rush, Marco Detour, or sometimes even a Salouen Home-side Siege."

Uh... That doesn't mean much to me. I've never heard of half of these.

Togi players like him weren't uncommon. The textbooks could provide lists of strategies, but they'd always vary depending on the player. Some people then tried to come up with names for all of these variations. But if it was a strategy taxonomy, then the naming only extended down to the subspecies level. It was impossible to learn every variation.

This guy sure loves togi. Wish he could've used some of that passion to knock Jula out of the tournament for me.

"That's useful information," I lied while bowing my head. "Thank you very much."

"We shouldn't stick around too long. Wanna head back?" the muscular boy asked the others while getting up.

The others replied with, "Yeah, all right" and, "You're probably right."

That's a relief. Peace returns to the dorm.

Although they weren't adults, it was still hard to relax with older students hanging around.

Just before leaving, the muscular boy reached out to shake my hand. "Didn't introduce myself, did I? Maybe you know me already, but I'm Liao Rube. I'll be cheering for you tomorrow."

"But of course I know you. I'm grateful for your support." I gave him a firm handshake while lying like it was second nature.

So he's from the Rube family.

I didn't recognize his first name, but the Rube family was one of the five chieftains. That made him similar to me.



I arrived at the castle at the appointed time the next day. It was evening rather than morning this time, so the sun was already close to setting.

Although the previous rounds had all been decided by singular games, the final would be a best of three. We'd be fine if someone lost twice in a row, but I started to worry that we might need to come back tomorrow if it dragged on to a third game.

I often finished a game in about thirty minutes when playing against Myalo, but there was no telling how long we'd play for if we both needed a lot of thought between moves. Each of yesterday's games had finished in under two hours, but we might be much more determined to win now that it was the final.

While I worried about the tight schedule, I passed through the open door into the royal castle. I found a mysterious woman waiting for me by the entrance.

"You must be Lord Yuri, here to compete in the final. I've been awaiting your arrival. I'll be your guide today. I'm here to assist you how I can."

"Oh, okay."

I don't get why I need a guide, but I guess it's just part of the event.

"We have your ceremonial attire prepared for you," she said after leading me into a separate room with a large mirror.

My attire? I thought she was a maid, but it sounds like her job is hair and makeup. And what does she mean, "ceremonial attire"? I'm not a bride at a wedding.

"No thank you. I'll be just fine wearing this," I told her.

I was dressed in my Knight Academy uniform, just like the day before.

"But sir..."

"And I'd rather not wear any makeup. It'll ruin my concentration."

"Please at least allow me to wash your face. I'd also like to straighten out your hair."

Is she saying I've got bed head?

"Okay, I don't mind that."

As much as I appreciated having my bed head fixed, it felt over the top for an amateur board game tournament. That said, I could sense there'd be some pomp involved.

I obediently took a seat.

She used a cloth soaked in hot water to straighten out my hair and clean my face, leaving me feeling much fresher.

"Wait, what are you putting on me?"

The stylist had some sort of grease from a bottle on her fingers, ready to put it into my hair.

"It's just a little."

"I told you I don't want anything like that."

"It's just a little. Please, just on the tips."

She sounded like she was getting worked up for some reason.

"Fine... I suppose it won't do any harm. What sort of oil is it though?"

"It's badger oil."

What...? Badger oil? I'm not letting her put that on me.

"Please relax. It's made by refining the fat of a giant badger just before it hibernates. It's nothing like cow fat—there's no unpleasant odor, and it's easy to wash out."

Uh...

Her explanation hadn't reassured me at all, but she wasn't going to let me get out of it.

"All right... Go ahead." I couldn't be bothered to argue.

I watched my hair become glossy as she applied the oil and combed it in. Finally, she arranged my hair into something close to a side part.

I could smell the oil a little, but she was right that it didn't have a foul odor.

"Now for your attire."

Now for my what?

“Do I really need to change?”

“Of course. Your current clothing isn’t exactly...”

She wasn’t sparing my feelings.

What’s wrong with this?

My uniforms all wore out over time, and I grew so fast that I regularly needed to buy new ones when they couldn’t be re-tailored to fit. I was onto my fourth uniform, but this was my newest one—it had only been half a year since it was made.

I’d been sensible enough to pick out my best uniform and brush it clean before coming here. It was completely free from dust and feathers.

“Is there something wrong with what I’m wearing?” I demanded.

The stylist looked aghast. “Please forgive me for saying so, but there are multiple food stains on your blazer, and your pants are faded and badly frayed around the cuffs.”

I wordlessly looked down at my pant legs. Sure enough, I noticed that I’d washed away some of the color while getting all of the dirt off them. Repeated scrubbing had left them frayed too.

They always got dirty because I’d worn my uniform on countless trips to the waterwheel where the ground wasn’t paved. My shoes—along with everything else—would get caked in mud on rainy days. The dorm staff didn’t appreciate my requests to wash them afterward.

But even so, commoners often wore clothes in much worse condition and no one thought anything of it. I was as well dressed as a rich merchant, but apparently it wasn’t good enough for the final—not when they had a stylist and everything.

“Please let me give you another outfit. If you refuse, I’ll get into trouble.”

Now she was using emotional blackmail.

Okay, fine. I don’t care what I wear anyway.

“Very well. I’ll leave it to you,” I surrendered.

“Very well, sir. Now, how about...”

No way...

The change of clothes she picked out for me looked horribly old-fashioned, even to me. It was a traditional outfit that had been the most formal of formal attire back in the days of the empire. To me, it looked like a kamishimo that a Japanese samurai might wear for formal occasions.

Maybe it was just because we lived out in the sticks, but I’d never seen Rook wear anything like this, even to the most formal of gatherings.

She’s gotta be kidding me.

“Is this a joke?” I asked.

“What? No, not at all.”

She’s actually serious...

“I’m not particularly fussy about my clothes, but this seems over the top. Do you have anything a little more conventional?”

“In that case...”

She soon came back with something that looked like a tailcoat, dyed an impressive black. Well, it wasn’t quite right to call it a tailcoat—the back of the jacket wasn’t overly long, but it looked like formal evening attire. This was something I *had* seen Rook wear. Needless to say, it didn’t have any fraying, creases, or other flaws.

“How does this look?” she asked.

“That’ll do.”

I suppose this’ll be fine. She’s right that my uniform looks really shabby next to this.

The stylist breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, good.”

“Why didn’t you offer me this one first?”

I’d love to know. I’d be a laughingstock if I went out there wearing that other thing.

“I was informed that you’re of particularly high birth...”

High birth? I was born a rancher!

Once the stylist had helped me put on the new clothes, I headed for the event hall.



“I concede.”

During our second game, I was the one who put my hand on the board and surrendered.

Jula looked delighted.

I’d won the first game, so now we were tied. It would all come down to the third game.

“We’ll now take a short recess,” the timekeeper announced.



“Yuri, what are you doing?” Myalo demanded once we were in the break room.

She was uncharacteristically angry. There was no sign of her usual faint smile. I couldn’t remember ever seeing her look at me this way.

“What do you mean?”

“Please don’t play dumb. It’s obvious to me. Not just to me, in fact—anyone with a good grasp of togi can tell.”

“Really?”

I’d be in trouble if it wasn’t obvious.

“You’re losing on purpose?”

Yep, she’s realized.

“For now, yeah,” I replied, without trying to deny it.

“But why? Were you threatened?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Then why?!”

“I don’t want to make any enemies among the seven witches.”

That was all it came down to. Maybe “making enemies” wasn’t the right term here, but I was still at risk of drawing their anger. I didn’t have to be as careful around the Gudinveils because we weren’t business competitors, but my opponent was a Lacramanus. There wasn’t a single thing to gain from getting her to dislike me.

“I don’t understand you... Are you telling me that you, of all people, are scared? Of a mere *witch*?”

Jula was too powerful to be called a “mere” witch. I wasn’t going to underestimate her.

“I’m not scared, but I don’t have any reason to upset her. I *do* have reasons to curry favor with her, though.”

I had nothing to gain. Winning at this over-the-top event would result in some equally over-the-top praise and a ton of admiration from everyone watching. I knew that much.

Myalo probably thought that I wanted the glory, but it meant nothing to me. I would’ve behaved differently if the Ho family’s reputation was at stake, but it wasn’t. Although winning would be an honor, the cons definitely outweighed the pros in this situation.

Jula, on the other hand, was highly competitive, and this tournament meant everything to her.

If it was important to her, but didn’t matter to me, then there was no sensible option but to let her win. Plus, granting her the victory would put her in my debt. Sure, I’d be letting some people down if I lost—I felt a little bad for my dorm mates, since they’d picked me as their representative, but they’d just have to accept the outcome. None of them besides Myalo could’ve made it past the semifinal themselves anyway, and getting to the final at my age should’ve been praiseworthy enough.

“Are you worried that this might impact Sham’s standing within White Birch? You don’t need to be. They—”

“Myalo,” I interrupted her. “I’ve set my sights on bigger things than togi tournaments. I don’t need the glory that comes with winning here. As much as I hate the Lacramanus family, I’m ready to throw the game if that’s what they want from me.”

“But I thought you...”

I understood how Myalo felt. She wanted me to play the hero here, as the future head of a chieftain family. As for *why* she wanted it to be me—while gaining nothing from it herself—that was just her way of doing things.

In the same way that going against her upbringing to enter the Knight Academy gave her satisfaction, putting me on the path to victory would do the same. She wasn’t being encouraged by anyone, but that sense of satisfaction meant she’d happily go out of her way to make it happen.

There was nothing wrong with wanting to create a hero, but she risked sacrificing herself just to enjoy the spectacle.

“I don’t live to provide entertainment for you,” I told her bluntly. “I won’t do something just because you want to see it.”

Myalo’s expression soured, and she hung her head as if the words had broken something inside her. “It’s not like that...”

“It clearly is.”

For a while, Myalo didn’t say anything; she simply stood in one place. She didn’t move for about five minutes.

“I’m sorry. Everything I did just caused trouble for you,” she murmured, her words full of sadness. Her voice was like the trembling flame on a candle’s wick, threatening to vanish with the slightest breeze.

“I didn’t mention anything about it being trouble.”

“But...you just said...”

“Why would I think it’s trouble when you do things for me? I’ll have to thank you when this is over—I know you did it all for me.”

“Yes, I did...”

“It’s just that I can’t always be the person you want me to be. You can’t assume I’ll do the thing you wanted.”

“Perhaps you’re right...”

As levelheaded as Myalo was, some deep-rooted part of her was prone to fantasy. If I let it infect me and turn me into a dreamer too, I’d soon meet my downfall.

Though she always wanted the best for me and had proven herself to be an invaluable friend, not everything she did was for my benefit. Her goals were not my goals.

My guess was that Myalo ultimately wanted to bring about reforms in the Shiyalta Kingdom. Ensuring that I emerged from this tournament victorious was no doubt a small step toward that.

Unfortunately for her, that wasn’t the path I’d chosen for myself. I couldn’t say which of us was wiser, but I’d be left paralyzed if I ever started to value Myalo’s judgment above my own. I’d be left mentally dependent on her—the mindset of a slave.

“Do you understand what I mean?” I asked.

“Yes. What you’ve said is correct... If you were always willing to act out my every wish, there’d be no sense in following you. It’s obvious, now that I think about it.”

“You’re sure?”

I couldn’t tell whether she actually understood, and her face still bore an unreadable expression that might’ve been disappointment, but she didn’t argue with me. That was enough for the time being.

Myalo hesitated, then spoke. “Um... Can I make one last request?”

“Make three if you like.”

“You’re not afraid of witch families, are you?”

“Ha ha.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “Who’d be afraid of that lot?”

“Then tell me you’ll defeat them someday.”

Defeat them...?

Myalo's thinking really was fundamentally different from mine.

"They're parasites—they're only strong when they feed upon the host. Once the host dies, they'll be helpless—they'll go extinct without any action on my end," I replied.

No matter how strong a parasite's hold on its host was, they had to choose between fleeing or dying when that host faced a crisis. There were six perfect case studies that proved witch families exhibited this same behavior.

"I see... I'm not sure I understand."

She'll come to understand it soon enough... For better or worse.

We were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," I said.

It was one of the castle's maids. "Pardon me."

Looks like it's time for the third game. Break time over, I thought. It turned out I was mistaken, however.

"Lord Yuri, a visitor is here to speak with you."

"In that case, I'll excuse myself," Myalo said.

"Ah, yeah... See you."

Myalo walked past the maid and left the room.

"I believe it's urgent," the maid added. "Are you able to speak with the visitor right away?"



With my break over, I returned to my seat. Julia sat in front of me.

"Left to move first," the timekeeper declared without so much as asking if I was ready.

Julia had been given the first move each time so far.

She moved a piece, then I did likewise.

Once we were ten moves in, her strategy became obvious—she was aiming for a Kingeagle-Exchange Spear Placement.

Kingeagles moved diagonally, which made them similar to bishops in shogi and chess. They had a unique property that the others didn't, however. Most pieces' movements were restricted by two factors—other pieces on the board, and a region known as the river in the board's center. Kingeagles, however, could ignore these obstacles and jump over them. In my mind, I thought of them as snipers.

Jumping over all the pieces made it too easy to attack the king, though. It'd be boring if the players were to spend all their time moving their king around to avoid a check, so kingeagles were unable to jump over pieces known as royal guards and monarch's guards. Those pieces started out in positions in front of the king, offset one square to the left and right.

The fact that most pieces could be jumped over in togi changed the game dramatically. It rendered castles, like those seen in shogi, meaningless. And it wasn't just that—the game started with the king already under siege from the opponent's kingeagle, so any breakdown of the king's defense would put him at risk of being checked.

A Kingeagle-Exchange Spear Placement involved the player using the first few moves to sacrifice one of their kingeagles to take an opponent's. This strategy would leave them at a disadvantage after spending many of their early moves on it, but it would limit their opponent's options for offensive play.

Jula probably chose this opening because the use of the kingeagle happened to be one of my specialties.

"Hey, you," she said to me.

What? I don't think I've heard her voice at all up until now. I thought there was a rule against talking to the other player during this game.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Shouldn't I be...?

"I'm not feeling unwell, if that's what you mean," I replied.

Jula put her hand to her mouth and chuckled theatrically. “Maybe you can guess what I’m hinting at. You’re not worried?”

“Not particularly.”

“Not at all? Your little... What do you call it? Your little *store*.”

“You mean Ho Company?”

“I heard you’ve employed an awful lot of homeless commoners. They could be in trouble right now. Something about a fire...”

Jeez... She’s the lowest of the low.

I couldn’t hate her for being trash, since I was basically trash myself. I also had a soft spot for charismatic villains, but Jula didn’t have a shred of that.

“Well... One thing did surprise me,” I said.

Jula smiled sweetly. “Oh? What might that be?”

“I thought you’d be a lot smarter.”

Let you win? Earn your favor? That was never going to work out for me, was it?

I’d been sure to make it obvious that I’d let her win the last game, but she hadn’t even noticed. It turned out she was too dense for me to earn her favor that way. She was so confident in her own ability that she’d just end up crediting herself with any victories I handed to her.

“Word reached me just now,” I told her. “Four buildings completely burned down, but no casualties. It’s minor damage.”

“Oh...?”

Jula tried not to react, but she couldn’t hide her shock. Her fake smile looked awfully stiff.

You thought I didn’t know already? Moron.

“Though I hadn’t guessed that the whole point of burning down my property was to throw me off my game.”

“You mean to suggest that I’m responsible?”

Jula wasn't trying to talk quietly. Our entire conversation could be heard by the front-row spectators. I didn't know what she was thinking, but maybe witches took pride in winning like this.

"Rest assured, I won't be seeking compensation."

Not like I'd get any. There's no evidence.

"I don't want to argue over whether it's arson or not. It doesn't matter to me in the end," I added.

"Oh really? Then what *are* you trying to say?" she asked.

"That you're pure scum."

"You...!" Jula's face turned bright red with shame as she glared at me.

"If you hadn't done anything, I was going to let you win. You only won the last game because I let you, but it looks like *that* went over your head. You're a little inattentive for a witch, aren't you? Missing something like that, I mean."

Jula's face had turned scarlet with rage. "I won't stand for this impertinence!"

I wasn't finished. "I lost on purpose, but instead of showing gratitude, you burned down my property for the sake of springing a little surprise on me mid-game. Clearly, letting you win doesn't pay."

I'd been hoping to avoid a confrontation like this one, and I'd thought earning her favor might've helped avoid future clashes...or at least delay them. But since she'd destroyed my buildings anyway, there was no point in losing.

If it had just been the arson, I might've forgiven her.

After all, from her point of view, it was nothing personal. As long as the Lacramanus family received kickbacks from the parchment guild, they had no choice but to safeguard that revenue source. In other words, their interests were threatened. That left them with no choice but to attack their opponents, even if they bore them no ill will. That was just the reality of their situation.

Her family had tried indirect harassment first, and—when that hadn't had the desired effect—they'd had no choice but to be more direct. It was my fault for ignoring the warnings they'd given me.

The rotten old Gudineil woman had offered to protect me, and she might've kept the Lacramanus family off me for as long as I was willing to line her pockets. Once she'd grown tired of that responsibility, I could've struck deals with other witches and waited for the Lacramanus family's inevitable decline.

With all that in mind, I didn't take it personally when they chose to burn down the workshops I'd built. It seemed underhanded from my point of view, but to them it was standard practice. The Lacramanus family wouldn't change their ways just for me.

So the fire was understandable. Setting my workshops ablaze while I was stuck here and unable to act was also fine. But why had she tried to shock me with the news? Had she thought she could destroy Ho Company, and just as a little bonus, humiliate me at the same time? Yes, it was perfectly clear that this was what she wanted. She would've taken away my business and the glory of the tournament, then laughed as I hit my lowest point. That was being too greedy.

I see how it is.

"Arbiter, you can't allow me to be insulted like this," Julia said to the timekeeper (whose job title was apparently "arbiter").

"Yuri, I must ask you to be quiet," she said. "As a penalty, I'm setting your time to zero."

It was obvious to anyone that this wasn't fair, but Julia had managed to get away with everything so far. She must've paid the arbiter a hefty bribe.

I glanced over at the queen and saw an incredible scowl on her face. Clearly, the arbiter was being bribed enough that she could afford to lose her job at the castle without being reduced to poverty.

With my time taken away, I'd have to move within about thirty seconds or I'd automatically lose. It was a huge handicap, but it made things so interesting that I couldn't help but smile.

"Heh... I don't mind," I chuckled. "But what about you?"

"What?" Julia replied.

I tapped my index finger against the corner of the board. “Losing to me is one thing, but losing after using dirty tricks and putting me at a major disadvantage... That won’t look good for you.”

I wasn’t going to let her win.



I wasn’t even looking at the board anymore. I remained expressionless as I stared straight at Jula, my elbow on the chair’s armrest and my head propped against my hand.

At this point, Jula’s face was much more fitting for someone her age. She was scowling at the pieces on the board, looking close to tears.

Her efforts were futile. She’d never been a match for me. It was just as everyone had told me the day before—the opponent I’d faced in the semifinal had been far stronger. If Jula had played against her ten times, she would’ve been lucky to win even one of those games. They lived in the same dorm, so they’d probably played against each other several times.

Jula knew I’d won in the semifinal. Given that she’d seen my skill for herself during our first game, it was incredible that she believed she’d beaten me on skill alone during our second match.

It was also odd that she thought she could easily win this decisive round just by surprising me. She must’ve assumed everything would go her way, without the need for a plan B.

Maybe she hadn’t played *togi* with her dorm mates much. Or maybe she had, and they had all let her win because they feared her family. I had no way of knowing.

At this point, she was already in *threatmate*. It was just a question of whether she’d give up now or after it turned into *brinkmate*... Or maybe she’d throw the board at me as a form of petty revenge. I wouldn’t have put it past her.

As childish as it would be, flipping the board and showering me with *togi* pieces so that I fell off my chair would leave me looking foolish. It wasn’t a bad idea, given how hopeless her situation was. She could even use my earlier rudeness as an excuse.

I'd better be on my guard.

"I...concede..." Julia bit her lower lip in frustration, and with tears welling up in her eyes, she placed her hand on the board.

It was over.

The moment the game ended, there was a thunderous cheer from the standing spectators. The Knight Academy students were literally jumping up and down with joy.

While everyone celebrated, I simply sat where I was, not knowing what I was supposed to do next.

Eventually, Carol got up from her place in the VIP seating area and walked over to me. She was wearing a navy blue dress that was almost black. A delicate clip made of amber and silver held her golden hair in place, providing a perfect complement to the dress. On top of that, she was wearing high heels, so she looked like a completely different person when she stood up.

"You can't do anything normally, can you?" Carol asked.

Despite her appearance, she was still the same person on the inside.

"She was the one who started it. I didn't ask for trouble."

"Only because you make everything difficult."

"Is that why?"

I felt a lot less confident all of a sudden.

Maybe she's right.

I had a feeling I'd just set myself up for a lot of future headaches.

"But well done. You played beautifully."

Carol gave me a bold smile as she gently presented her hand. This time, she wasn't going to pat me on the shoulder.

"Did I really?"

I stood up straight, took her hand, knelt down, and kissed it.



I left the hall as soon as I could, changed back into my uniform, and ran out of the royal castle. Although the fire wasn't an emergency, I wanted to reach the waterwheel as soon as possible.

"Yuri," Myalo called to me from outside the castle's gate. She was holding the reins to a plainrunner. She must've gotten it from the Ho residence, because it was wearing one of my family's saddles. "I'm terribly sorry," Myalo apologized with her head hung low.

"For what?"

"I was thoughtless. I know those buildings are important to you. If I hadn't forced you into this tournament..."

"Myalo," I said forcefully. "It's not that serious. I'm not blaming you for anything."

They would've attacked sooner or later anyway. If anyone was to blame, it was me. This was the price I had to pay for the excessive profits my company was making. It wasn't Myalo's doing.

"It's not just that. I interrupted your break to criticize you when I didn't even understand your situation. That was inexcusable."

Myalo was still looking down.

"Lift your head up."

"All right..."

She raised her head so I could look at her.

The expression on her face made me think of a naughty child about to be scolded by their mother, or a puppy afraid to be abandoned by its master. There was no sign of her usual perceptive smile. It was an immature face, but that was fitting for someone her age.

Myalo must've fetched the plainrunner to make it up to me. It had been less than twenty minutes since the final had finished, which wouldn't have been enough time for her to fetch the bird. She must've headed out to the Ho residence after hearing our conversation at the togi board, then somehow convinced the guards there to let her take it.

It was impressive how swiftly she'd taken action, but it only left me pitying her more. She worked so hard, even though she was only sixteen.

"You idiot."

I walked over to Myalo and hugged her tight. Though we were the same age, Myalo's body was so much smaller than mine. Her shoulders were no wider than my chest.

"Um..."

"Don't make such a big deal of it. No matter what mistakes you make, I could never hate you."

"Okay..."

Myalo's body relaxed in my arms, as if my words were a relief.

"Um, I think now's the time to tell you that I'm...a g-girl."

What's she talking about?

"If I thought you were a boy, I wouldn't be hugging you like this. That'd be gross."

"I s-suppose not... But could you let go? Treating me like this could...g-give me the wrong impression."

I released Myalo; her cheeks had turned red.

I just wanted to comfort her... That took a weird turn.



“W-Weren’t you in a hurry, Yuri? Please go. I’ll be just fine.”

“You’re right. I should.”

I stepped into one of the stirrups, then threw my other leg over the saddle. It was so much easier to move around now that I was back in my Knight Academy uniform.

“Here.” Myalo passed me the reins.

“All right. Thanks for the plainrunner.”

I set the bird running.



The buildings around the watermill had been completely burned to the ground. The only thing that had been left unscathed was the waterwheel itself, since it was wet. The door, roof, and other wooden parts of its adjoining mill had all burned away.

With water readily available from the nearby river, a fire caused by an arson attack should’ve been easy to extinguish before things had gotten out of hand, but it was clear that there’d been no attempt to put it out.

That had been necessary in order to appease the Lacramanus family and the parchment guild. A greater amount of damage here would help to quell their anger toward us. We didn’t need this place anymore anyway.

“Catch anything?” I asked Caph as he arrived on the scene.

“Sure did,” he replied.

Even though the sun had already set, Caph and more than twenty others were here at the charred remains of the company workshops. Some were getting sentimental and tearing up at the sight of the smoldering embers that still glowed amid the wreckage.

In the center of these burned-out husks blazed a bonfire that kept the area brightly lit. There was a man there who looked very different from everyone else—both because of the gag in his mouth and the fact that his hands were bound behind his back.

The man was dragged over to me. He looked like he'd been beaten within an inch of his life, and half of his face was swollen beyond recognition. The state of his face made it hard to judge, but he looked like a mature adult. It wasn't just his injuries that made him look strange either—he was dressed in black from head to toe, like a ninja.

This was one of the arsonists.

"So this is what you caught?" I asked. "Remove the gag."

"He'll kill himself," Caph warned.

He wants to die?

"Ah. Leave it in that case."

We didn't want to give him the chance to bite his tongue.

"Did he try to kill himself already?" I asked.

"He was about to drive his dagger into his own stomach, but we beat him with sticks and gagged him up like this before he got the chance." Caph couldn't fully suppress the rage in his voice. The attack had clearly gotten to him.

"It must've been intense." *For friends and foe alike.* "Why's he lying down? Make him sit up."

One of the employees forced the man into a sitting position there on the ground.

His legs were unbound, so sitting and walking around were no problem, but he wouldn't get a chance to run. He obediently sat there with his legs crossed.

"Let's interrogate him first."

I crouched down in front of the man.

"Are you with the second order of the royal guard? Nod or shake your head."

The man simply glared at me. His head didn't move.

"You're one of Lacramanus's own soldiers then?"

He didn't respond to this question either.

"Not that it matters. I'm just wondering who'd be dumb enough to get caught

in our trap.”

We’d captured him with a very simple snare. We’d taken a large branch from one of the trees near the workshops, bent it, and tied it down with a rope. The end of the rope formed a lasso that was secured against the ground. This idiot had kicked the fitting that held the rope in place, causing the branch to spring up and lift the rope with it so that the lasso tightened around his leg. He was left suspended upside down, like a fish on a pole.

We’d set it up partly for fun, knowing an attack would likely happen after dark, but we hadn’t actually expected to catch anything. When he’d tried to kill himself, people were waiting nearby with large sticks, ready to beat him into submission and tie him up before he could do it.

If he’d been sent to carry out an arson attack, he was like a special agent...but considering that he’d gotten caught in such a basic trap, I doubt he’d been trained much at all.

“Hmm...”

Now, what to do with him? It’s not like he can tell us anything. Maybe we should kill him.

Killing and burying him here was an option. The enemy might panic when he didn’t return. When a captured man went missing, it could cause all kinds of headaches for his employers. They’d always wonder whether he’d talked, whether he was alive somewhere, and whether he’d turned traitor.

Another option was to release him, hoping that the witches would appreciate the gesture. I highly doubted that would work.

Hmm...

“Remove the gag,” I ordered after I was done deliberating.

“You’re sure?” Caph furrowed his brow.

“As much as I’d enjoy torturing him, it wouldn’t tell us anything new. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter whether he’s with the royal guard or a private army. We know who sent him.”

“That’s true,” Caph agreed.

“Before that gag comes off, let me just warn you,” I told our captive. “We won’t put your body on display. Bite your tongue if you want—we’ll bury you naked in the woods. You’ll disappear, and they’ll assume you turned traitor. It’s the only rational thing for me to do. Don’t take it personally.”

Since we weren’t trying to make him talk, it wouldn’t matter to us if he killed himself. I was letting him know that he’d only be saving us the trouble.

“Now remove the...” I hesitated and didn’t finish my sentence.

Why’d he try to kill himself while he was still hanging upside down?

Clearly, he had a reason for wanting his allies to know that he was dead, rather than leaving his fate a mystery. Whatever organization he was working for, he didn’t want them to even suspect he might still be alive, or—more to the point—that he’d turned a traitor.

If that meant so much, then his fellow soldiers might’ve also taken an interest in his fate.

“Hold on,” I said. “Let’s do this in the remains of the watermill.”

“Why?”

“Someone could be hiding nearby, watching us.”

The bright moon gave us good visibility that night, but we had no way of knowing what might be lurking in the undergrowth surrounding us.

The watermill was black with soot, and its roof had caved in, but enough of its sun-dried bricks remained to shield us from prying eyes.

“Carry him.”

The employees dragged the arsonist into the watermill.

I plunged the end of a torch into a barrel of thick oil before igniting it so that we’d have light. These torches burned for a long time, but sadly they also created thick clouds of black smoke.

“Form a wall of people at the entrance.”

The door had been burned away, which might’ve left us visible to anyone watching.

“Okay, now remove the gag.”

After checking we were fully obscured, I gave the order.

The man glared at me, but didn’t try to bite his tongue.

Why not?

My assumption must’ve been right—he’d wanted his body to be seen by his allies after his death. He couldn’t take his own life now that he knew his death might go unnoticed.

“Not going to kill yourself after all? All right then.”

I could think of two motives he would’ve had for suicide.

First, he might’ve chosen to end his own life rather than face whatever grizzly fate remained under our hands. It was common for people to choose suicide when only a bleak future awaited them.

For example, when someone was captured by the Kulati, a life as a slave—or a sex slave if they were female—was all that awaited them. Many preferred to end their lives. Likewise, when someone was captured by people like witches—who were capable of torturing their victims beyond recognition—death was preferable to the suffering they’d otherwise face.

But this couldn’t be his reason. He was a fool, but not foolish enough to think we’d be so barbaric.

The second possible motivation was that he feared for something important to him—similar to someone deliberately dying so that their family might receive a life insurance payout.

He might’ve worried that he would end up revealing information to us under torture, leading him to be branded a traitor by his allies. But if that was the case, he’d have bitten his tongue the moment we removed the gag.

There had to be something making him hesitate. If his allies found out about his treason, they might go after something precious to him. It would explain why he didn’t want to kill himself now that we’d set things up here instead. His credibility would be questioned if he died here.

“What is it? Will someone kill your mother if you tell us who sent you? No,

you're old enough to have kids they can threaten."

He looked surprised as I spoke. His face was unexpectedly easy to read.

"That's how they operate, isn't it?"

I still had to decide what to do with him. If we let him go, it would make us look weak. Plus, Caph was still angry.

"All right. We'll let you go. But to make it even, you have to come back to us with a hostage that the witches were holding."

"What?" he finally spoke. The inside of his mouth must've been swollen from the beating, because it was hard to understand what he said.

"You're damned whether you live or die. You might as well betray them so that you get the chance to flee with your family."

He was silent.

"Yuri, no." Caph didn't like the idea. "Release him and he'll just go back to serving his masters."

"I know. But if he doesn't come back, we can spread a rumor saying that a traitor joined Ho Company, and that they're feeding us information."

The man's face stiffened.

"Suppose you go back with your face all swollen. You think they'll believe you when you say you escaped without help? Then, when we spread our rumor, it'll be like confirmation that we've bought you as a spy. You'll be finished."

Caph frowned. "But why go to all that trouble?"

"Killing him's not going to make us feel better, is it?"

"I guess not..."

"I don't know what sort of terrible things he might've done in the past, but there's a good chance he's learned things that he'd be better off not knowing. His employers won't let him go easily. If we kill him here and hang him from a tree, it'll be exactly what he wants. At the very least, he won't be punished as a traitor."

"If you say so. I'm not gonna argue."

All right.

“You’re free. Get up.”

I kicked the man to make him stand up, and he went running off with his hands still bound behind his back.

“Is the underground storehouse safe?” I asked.

“Probably,” Caph replied.

“Probably? You didn’t check?”

It wasn’t like Caph to cut corners like that.

The underground storehouse held various things, including our paper molds, fractional distillation apparatus, and barrels of badly separated oil fractions. The door was buried under dirt and soaked with water to fireproof it. The passageway led deep underground too. No matter how fiercely a fire burned on the surface, the contents were unlikely to be harmed.

We didn’t need the watermill or our wooden buildings anymore. As long as we had the equipment we’d moved underground, we could easily relocate the business to another place.

“The way the burned buildings caved in looks natural right now,” Caph explained. “If I start clearing away the rubble, it’s going to make it obvious where the door is.”

Ah, that’s a fair point.

“I was hoping we’d move everything to the head office by carriage before the end of the day.”

Caph tilted his head. “They’re not gonna realize there’s an underground storehouse. Just leave it as it is.”

“Thing is, I ended up humiliating her. If she wants revenge, the next attack might be more thorough.”

It was entirely possible. Even if they didn’t know the storehouse existed, they’d soon notice the door if they searched the wreckage. It was locked, but it wouldn’t keep out anyone with an axe. I couldn’t guarantee that they wouldn’t

go that far.

“Ah... You won, did you?”

“I did. She kept saying stupid things to provoke me. I would’ve let her have her moment otherwise.”

It really didn’t have to come to this. I could’ve placated her by losing the game. A couple of months from now, it would’ve all been water under the bridge.

“Right... We’d better take extra precautions then,” Caph agreed.

“Just to be safe. If we lose all that gear, it’ll take us a long time to get up and running again.”

“In that case, I’ll head back into the city and get us a carriage.”

Caph already knew where to get hold of one.

“It’ll be quickest if you go by plainrunner,” I told him. “Ride behind me.”

It wasn’t very late at night. We could also buy some alcohol on the way and treat the workers to a drink.

“Let me tell you something first,” Caph said.

“What?”

“You’re too soft. Someone’s gonna take advantage someday.” He didn’t mince his words.

Yeah, I realize I might’ve been taken for a fool just now. We should’ve killed the man and buried him.

I’d said he was damned whether he lived or died, but nothing was stopping him from committing seppuku—killing himself to restore his honor—in front of the Lacramanus family manor. I’d left him a way to clear his name.

In that case, his death wouldn’t have any psychological impact on our enemy whatsoever. Even if he *did* bring a hostage back to us and then flee like I’d told him to, I wouldn’t be any better off.

Killing him was the only option that would’ve guaranteed an advantageous outcome, but I’d felt pity for him after realizing that they had his family.

“I know,” I said, without any real feeling.

I wondered whether a day would come that I’d truly learn that lesson.

Chapter 2 — Commerce

I

From high in the sky atop Stardust, I could see that construction had already begun.

The site was on the edge of a huge lake that could be reached by setting out from the town on the Atlantic Ocean's coast known as Suomi—where Harol the trader regularly set sail from—and following the river north toward the mountains.

We had several reasons for setting up a new base here.

Firstly, the region was forested, which meant we'd have all the wood we needed for making paper. There was also a mountain close by where we could collect lime. And the scale of the lake that fed the river meant that we could run waterwheels on it at all times without worrying about the flow dying down.

But our biggest reason for moving here was that this piece of land was governed directly by the Ho family's head household.

There was a vast region of land in the southern part of the peninsula that all technically belonged to my family, but the majority of it had been given to various knight families as fiefs. Those other families never truly owned the fiefs they'd been given; they were merely trusted to govern over them. Their land could be taken away if there was a good reason to do so—for example, if the family proved completely incompetent or tyrannized the population. But the family was assured that they'd have almost complete control over the region as long as they avoided such failures. Essentially, members of the Ho family kept their noses out of others' business.

The only region that my family maintained direct control over was a small fraction of our territory centered on Kalakumo. The area I was visiting, however, was an exception. This was the one region besides Kalakumo that was being managed by the family directly.

If I'd been anywhere else, I would've needed to pay certain respects to the knight family managing the region before I could go about my business. The lack of a local ruler saved me a lot of trouble.



Stardust descended on a nearby empty patch of land.

The construction site was full of sweaty employees wielding the carpenter's tools we'd purchased from the royal capital. Nearby, a number of military tents that we'd borrowed from the manor in Kalakumo served as temporary accommodation for staff.

As I removed my safety harness and climbed off Stardust, Caph walked leisurely toward me.

"Hey," he said. "You're finally here."

"How's progress?" I asked him while leading Stardust by the reins.

"We're ahead of schedule. A limitless supply of lumber makes all the difference."

The people of the local village made a living by fishing and logging. Although forested areas were plentiful in the kingdom, most couldn't be easily reached by boat. And trees couldn't simply be used in construction as soon as they were felled; the wood had to be thoroughly dried first. Setting up wooden structures here was turning out to be an easy task, thanks to the large stocks of ready-to-use lumber available nearby.

"It also helps that some of our employees used to work as carpenters. They'll be focused on carpentry work for the time being."

"When you've got people to spare, have them make carriages."

It was about time for us to start expanding beyond our paper business. Though now we had a transportation problem because the royal capital was the biggest consumer of paper.

"Carriages?"

"I want to start trading more than just paper. We'll use iron to give some of them leaf springs for suspension. It'll make them comfortable to ride."

Ordinary carriages had wheels that attached directly to the carriage floor and transmitted vibrations directly to the passengers. Giving them suspension in between would do a lot to alleviate that issue. But even without oil cylinders or leaf springs made of iron, the latter could still be made from multiple layers of tough wood instead; they would still be enough because we weren't going to transport several-ton loads.

I hoped that in the process of developing solutions to our company's needs, we'd also come up with products that independent merchants might be willing to buy from us.

"I don't get it, but it sounds like you had a new idea."

"Thinking is a chairman's job."

"I'm not sure it is..." Caph looked at me in disbelief. "Anyway, you'll have to explain it to the carpenters. They need to finish the buildings first though, so it'll be a while before they can start on carriages."

"It can wait until they've got time."

"All right. We'll have to get them to practice making paper too."

It generally took at least two weeks of practice before someone got the hang of making even sheets of paper. Caph must've been planning on assigning people to that after the building work was done.

"Sure. And hire as many people as we can afford. There are no witches here. We can do as we please without anyone complaining."



Later, as I was walking around and surveying the sweaty employees toiling away with their hammers, I noticed a rapidly approaching figure. The man, who was riding a plainrunner, was heading to us from downstream.

Although I used plainrunners all year round, most people never rode them at all. This rider had to be a knight, or a servant from the royal castle who'd come to deliver a royal edict. They might've also been a plainrunner breeder, similar to Rook in the past, but such people were an even rarer sight around here. Breeders normally lived in the mountains or in the countryside.

As the plainrunner stopped before me, it killed its momentum by digging its talons into the dirt. I couldn't help but frown. The rider hadn't been on course to run me over, so I couldn't complain, but I hated to see a bird treated this way. Coming to a sudden stop like this risked injuring its legs. Since they had no hooves, they had to use their talons when stopping suddenly. Plainrunners' legs were worked hard enough already without being put under unnecessary strain through this sort of treatment. Then again, far be it from me to tell someone else how to treat their bird.

The rider calmed the plainrunner and climbed down from the saddle. Then he surprised me by going down on one knee in the dirt.

"Haah, haah..." he panted. "I am at your s-service. My apologies for arriving so late."

Huh? Who is this?

He certainly wasn't a knight in my service, so he shouldn't have been taking the knee before me.

"Are you...Jano Ek?" I asked cautiously.

"You are indeed correct, Lord Yuri."

Lord Yuri? I didn't come here to be your lord.

"Please raise your head. I'm not here to carry out my father's business."

"M-My apologies. I..." Jano Ek lowered his head again.

He was nothing like I'd expected him to be. Jano Ek was the nephew of Rakunu Ek—the man who'd turned his weapon on the Ho family after I'd fooled him at the succession council.

Needless to say, the Ek family's standing hadn't been the same since. The Ek family's head had once held the lofty title of lord-of-estates and governed over a vast area. Specifically, they'd governed this entire basin region, including everything around the large lake and everything along the river as far south as Suomi and the estuary connecting it to the Atlantic.

Now, of course, the Eks had been stripped of everything... Though maybe that wasn't quite the right way to say it. More accurately, they'd given it up by

violating the same contract that gave them authority over this area as our retainers. The land had simply reverted back to being governed by the Ho family.

But even though this land was originally ours, the Eks had ruled over it for two hundred years. When it was taken from them, they surely felt that they'd been stripped of something that was rightfully theirs.

Everything had been decided by Satsuki since it happened so soon after Rook was appointed head of family.

Rakunu had been imprisoned in the dungeon, and shortly after he'd been presented with a dagger. He'd used it to cut open his own stomach.

But what really surprised me was that the former head of the Ek family—Rakunu's father—had also killed himself upon hearing the news. Rakunu's wife and child had also done so. They'd all cut their own throats when the news of Rakunu's betrayal had reached Suomi.

This family suicide wasn't just motivated by their unbearable shame—it was a way of begging the Ho family to forgive them. They made it very clear in their wills, which read more like appeals for mercy.

When Satsuki learned of this, she probably wondered whether madness ran in the Ek family. Regardless, she chose to be very lenient toward the surviving members. She could've ignored it if they'd simply died of shame, but she couldn't deal out harsh punishments after the leading members of a powerful household had killed themselves in an appeal for forgiveness.

Satsuki had therefore installed a son born to Rakunu's younger sister as the acting governor of the region. That son's name was Jano Ek. If the family worked hard for several generations, they might win back some of their former power.

That said, an acting governor was akin to a superintendent. The family did not own the land, nor was the family head one of the Ho family's knights. The Ek family's lineage and tales of their history within the region was all that afforded them any respect. Technically, it wasn't a noble family anymore.

This was the first time I'd seen Jano Ek. He looked rather thin for a knight. He

was probably in his forties, but since Shanti people always looked so young, he could've passed for about thirty.

"Forgive me," I said. "I should've been the one who came to you."

"Not at all! It's only natural that I should arrive here to welcome you, Lord Yuri."

His attitude should've been predictable, given who I was. Politics was a tricky business. We had to consider not just our relationship as individuals, but also our roles as officials.

Jano had no way of knowing what sort of person I was. He was wise to act this way just in case I was the type to lord over him as a noble despite being here on personal business.

We were also far from the royal capital, where news of Ho Company was unlikely to reach him. He probably hadn't even heard of Ho paper.

"I hope I won't cause you too much trouble, but I plan to be here for some time," I said.

"Not at all. It's my pleasure to have you here as my guest, Lord Yuri. I am at your service, and you may call upon me without hesitation."

I felt like asking whether he was the acting governor or a bellboy.

"In that case, I'll contact you if there's anything I need from you."

"Yes, of course."

Having someone like this as the local governor actually made life easier for me. At least I knew he wasn't going to get in the way of my company's operations. Though if I had the option, I would've preferred someone just a little more laid back.



At Jano Ek's insistence, I headed downstream to the coastal town of Suomi. That was where his residence, which served as the governor's mansion, was located.

The Ek family hadn't been stripped of all of its wealth, so they still owned

things like this residence.

It was really just an ordinary home, rather than property of the region's ruler. Seeing it used as a government building made me feel that the lines between personal and government interests were being blurred, but such distinction wasn't considered important in this kingdom. It was ruled by an aristocracy, after all.

I was sitting in the Ek family's parlor, chatting about my company.

"...And then our production facility within the royal capital was set on fire."

"What a terrible thing to have happen," Jano interjected.

"It wasn't that bad. We were always going to move here sooner or later. It's tough doing business in the royal capital."

We would still be selling our products there, as we always had, but moving our production facilities would protect us against the witches. And I wasn't lying when I said I'd been planning to move anyway—we'd been close to outgrowing the original facilities.

"I see. Quite the situation. Your achievements are impressive for someone so young. The Ho family's future is safe in your hands, I'm sure."

I wanted to ask how he thought anything could be secure given the current state of the world, but I bit my tongue. The important thing in a discussion like this was for us both to avoid any touchy subjects. Still, he didn't have to suck up to me this much.

"I've still got a lot to learn," I replied. "I just hope that my work with the company will benefit my family someday."

"You have achieved great things already. I, Jano Ek, am most impressed."

Not very subtle with his flattery, is he?

"What impresses me is this beautiful home of yours," I said.

I'd decided to compliment the residence because I'd run out of things to talk about, though I wasn't lying.

"No, I'm quite sure that this is a vulgar affair compared to Ho Manor."

Our meaningless conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Enter,” Jano said.

A maid entered the room. “I have prepared tea for you, sir.”

The maid quietly came over to us and then began arranging the tea set with a series of clinking sounds.

This was how knight families showed hospitality. The custom was for a servant to place down empty cups and then fill them in plain sight. The guest would then be offered a choice of cups. The idea was that the guest couldn’t be poisoned. They certainly didn’t do this in the royal capital’s teahouses.

“Or perhaps you’d prefer a hard drink, Lord Yuri,” Jano suggested.

The Shanti drank heavily, and there was nothing unusual about offering someone a little alcohol during the day.

“That’s quite all right. I have more to do today.”

“I’m sure a small drink wouldn’t hurt.”

“I’m still quite young. I’d likely bring shame on myself with drunken behavior.”

It was an excuse. The real reason was that alcohol could damage a developing brain (or so I suspected). Given the great longevity of the Shanti, I would hate to lose my wits before even hitting twenty.

“Such prudence is exactly what I’d expect from a gentleman such as yourself.”

Yeah, sure.

The maid had finished setting down the cups and now began pouring the tea. It might’ve been her youth, or perhaps it was her nerves, but she was clumsy. The teapot shook in her trembling hand, striking against the teacup repeatedly. It sounded like a bell ringing.

As expected, she hit the edge of a teacup as she lifted the tray up from the table, knocking the cup over.

“Ah!” she cried.

I quickly moved to avoid the hot water that threatened to spill all over me. My

legs were spared, but a little splashed on my jacket.

“Oh my! Sorry! I’m terribly sorry!”

For some reason it was Jano, rather than me, who the maid began bowing and apologizing to.

“Look at what you’ve done!” he cried.

There was a dull sound of an impact.

Whoa...

Jano Ek had surprised me by striking the maid’s head with his fist. He’d done it so suddenly that I hadn’t had a chance to stop him.

“Uh... I’m sorry...”

The pain from the blow had caused the maid to drop to her knees, then slump on the floor.

Hold up. I’d understand the reaction if she’d thrown scalding water on my face, but I dodged it. There’s no need for this.

“Bitch. Don’t you understand what you’ve just done?” Jano Ek grabbed the maid by her slender arm and pulled it roughly.

“Th-That hurts.”

Wait. No, I’m not allowing this. She’s about fifteen. A hardened knight like him could easily break her arm.

“Unhand her,” I commanded him.

“Ah... I’m sorry you had to see this shameful display...”

In an instant, Jano went from being enraged back to his usual calm self. He let go of the maid’s arm in the process.

What’s wrong with him? He looks friendly one minute, then flies into a rage the next. Do wild outbursts run in the family?

“Just leave us,” I said, issuing an order to the maid even though it wasn’t my home.

“Y-Yes, sir... Please excuse me.”

The maid practically ran to the exit, and then bowed to me briefly before leaving and closing the door behind her.

“I’m ever so sorry... I’ll have a word with her later.”

Not the apology I wanted.

“I don’t care about that. The people of this region belong to my family. You can’t expect me to stand by while you beat them and break their arms.”

As much as I hated seeing a man who was quick to raise his hand to a woman, the unfortunate truth was that people in this kingdom saw it as a natural part of someone’s upbringing and education. Caph didn’t behave this way, but it was common to see other merchants and craftsmen smacking their young maids across the head for one reason or another. So while I couldn’t judge Jano too harshly for striking his maid, he’d gone way too far in this case.

If this territory had belonged to someone else, I wouldn’t have had a cause to complain. But this land was under direct control of the Ho family, so the people were not his to abuse.

Who does this guy think he is?

“Indeed... You’re quite right. I, Jano Ek, will not forget.”

He’s just telling me what I want to hear. Well, at least I know there’s no chance of his family regaining the territory in his lifetime. I’m keeping my eye on him.



I’d been invited to stay the night at the Ek residence, but I left as soon as I could. After looking around the town, I headed toward the port. I planned to retire to an inn.

The port was bustling with people. Many ships were built here, and it was also the port Harol used when he set off toward what would be Ireland in my old life. The place was most commonly used for trade with cities beyond the mountains, however.

Our first set of celestial navigation equipment had been completed recently, including some fairly large and highly precise clocks. It had all cost a pretty

penny, but we wouldn't need anything more now. Celestial navigation would allow us to sail across the open ocean. At the very least, it wouldn't be difficult to reach somewhere that we'd already been before.

I was walking along a stone embankment on the coast. As I looked out to the sea and wondered how we might make money out of this newfound technology, I noticed a homeless man sitting on the embankment and watching the sun set over the water.

He had a thick, bushy beard and unkempt hair that had turned frizzy in the ocean air. It, along with his mud-covered jacket, billowed in the wind.

If this had been a manga, he'd probably turn out to be a genius military strategist, a famous philosopher, or maybe a great warrior who'd later become the main character's teacher. Those thoughts made me nostalgic.

As I walked by, I realized he was mumbling something to himself that almost sounded like a song.

"...said the master. That which comes from the sea returns to the sea, and to the mountain that which comes from the mountain. They depart from the place they were born so that they may find the path to the netherworld. Or else, they'll stray from the path. The..."

It was Yeesusism's scripture, and he was reciting it in Terolish.

I was immediately suspicious. *Is he Kulati?* I wondered. I tried to check his ears, but they were hidden beneath his thick hair.

I put my hand to the dagger I wore behind my back. Something wasn't right here.

"Hey, you. Who are you?" I asked him in Terolish.

The man slowly turned to look at me, letting me see his sunburned face. It was an awful sight. The cracks in his burned skin were crusted with dirt, suggesting that he'd neither bathed nor washed his face in some time.

"What?" he said.

The man fixed me with a blank stare. Suddenly, I recognized him.

"It can't be... Harol Harrell."

“Oh, it’s you...” Harol’s voice was weak, as though he was here in body but not spirit.

Somewhat forcibly, I grabbed him and dragged him into a nearby tavern.

“What in the world happened?”

There was already a beer on the table.

“Answer me. And drink your beer.” I pushed the tankard toward him.

Harol picked it up and began to chug. He looked like he needed it. Then he broke into a violent coughing fit, spilling the drink from his mouth and creating stains on his jacket. His throat must’ve been raw from the sea air.

Once he’d gotten himself together, he attempted it again. This time, he drained the tankard dry without any coughing.

“Excuse me,” I called over the waitress. “Could we get another beer?”

“Liquor,” Harol said.

Getting the most out of his free drinks, I see.

“Sorry—could we get a tankard of liquor, rather than beer?”

I’ll let him drink as much as he likes.

“A tankard?” the surprised waitress repeated the order back. She probably didn’t get many requests for liquor in a tankard.

Not sure what I’ll do if he accidentally drinks himself to death, but I’ll worry about that later.

“Yes, a tankard. And can we get a large helping of meat with that? Something that isn’t too spicy. This should cover it.”

I gave her three silver coins. A tankard of liquor wasn’t going to be cheap, so I figured I’d better pay upfront.

“Understood, sir.”

She brought out the drink a short while later.

My jaw dropped when Harol picked it up and started gulping it down.

“So what happened?” I asked.

Harol was already too drunk to speak. “My jip... Jip’s...gone...”

Jip? He lost a friend named Jip? How sad. No, that can’t be right. He means his ship? He lost his ship?

If his ship had sunk or something like that, that would explain why he was so down.

“Was it pirates?” I asked.

“No... We go’ los’, so eebody mudinied. Dey put me anda old nabigader on a bo’ n frew us ober the jip.”

He got lost and...everybody mudinied... Umm, I think he means “mutinied” maybe? He got lost, the crew mutinied, and then they made him leave the ship on a small boat along with the old guy who was his navigator? Is that what he said?

A ship’s captain being killed or forced off the ship was a common turn of events in manga and novels, but I’d never known it to happen to one of my friends. I was surprised to hear of it happening in real life.

I wasn’t heartless enough to blame the crew.

Taking the ship out into open water was reckless in the first place. It wasn’t like crossing an inland sea enclosed by coasts, or a voyage that followed a coastline while the cliffs were still visible. Getting lost could mean a certain demise. Since seawater wasn’t drinkable, death was inevitable once the ship’s supplies were exhausted. A ship’s supplies would dwindle, day by day, until land was spotted.

The crew would start to worry. When a voyage that was supposedly going to take ten days dragged on for twenty days with no land in sight, it was only natural for the crew to demand answers. And if the ship was genuinely lost, there was no explanation that could put the crew’s fears to rest.

If supplies really did run out, the crew would angrily demand those responsible to pay the price. It wasn’t an unreasonable reaction. In fact, the crew had been quite merciful if they’d put Harol on a boat rather than just throwing him into the sea.

“What happened to the ship?”

“Din’ come back.”

If the ship had never returned, it suggested the crew were dead. That meant there was a ghost ship carrying a crew of dead men, drifting wherever the current carried it. Perhaps it had already run aground near some rocky cliff or shoal, perhaps it had sunk due to a leak in its hull, or perhaps a storm had capsized it.

May they rest in peace.

Still, abandoning two men on a little boat in open water was basically a death sentence. It was ironic that they were the only ones to come back alive. They couldn’t have been given food, so they must’ve been close to land when they left the ship. Maybe the navigator knew the general direction of the nearest shore all along.

“Wow. Sounds like you’ve been through a lot,” I said, while secretly thinking it was largely his own fault.

Harol might not have realized it, but what he’d been doing was like firing a gun at a distant target, while betting everything he owned that he’d hit it.

Without Harol on the ship to deal with people in Terolish, their voyage would be pointless. He couldn’t just let others do the work while taking the profit for himself. If one voyage in ten failed, the profits from the successful nine would normally cover the losses of the single failure. That approach didn’t work here, however, because his own life would always be at risk along with the ship.

Harol’s downfall had been inevitable. Even a skilled marksman capable of hitting the target time and time again would eventually make a mistake. In this case, that mistake could’ve cost him his life. It wasn’t just high risk—it was an unworkable business model. He was lucky that he’d only lost everything he owned and not his life.

Return voyages to Iceland—or Aisa Island as it was known here—were similar in that the success rate was said to be somewhere between fifty and seventy percent. When a voyage failed, the crew was presumed dead.

“I’m finished... Wuj you tell Ms. Esser I died at sea?”

Why would I do that? No way.

“You’ll be back on your feet in no time,” I reassured him.

“No... I spen’ all I had on goods... lss all gone...”

There’s no helping this dumbass.

“When you’re feeling down, they say the best cure is a night with a woman. Why not head to a brothel or something?”

I felt like a Japanese businessman offering to treat a colleague to a soapland. Actually, the situation wasn’t that far off. Still, the men of this world often regained their will to live after forgetting their troubles at a brothel.

“Women... Is fine.”

Oh?

“You mean it sounds like a fine idea?”

“Not goin’.”

Sounds like a no.

“Why not? What’s the problem?”

This is weird. I bet he hasn’t had any action in some time. I figured he’d jump at the offer.

“Ms. Ether says don’ do it if’s jus’ for pleasure.”

Ms. Ether said that? She’s telling him sex is bad now? But the guy’s been worshipping Yeesus for like five minutes. His reaction to that teaching should’ve been, “Whoa, I didn’t sign up to be a monk. Screw you guys, I’m going home!”

“But suicide’s not allowed either, is it?” I asked.

“Not gonna kill myself.”

So he wants me to tell her he died, but he’s not going to kill himself? What am I supposed to do with him?

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” the waitress said cheerfully as she brought out some flame-grilled meat.

When she noticed that Harol was drunk and rambling, she gave me a wink

and put the plate of meat down on the table. It was probably to signal that she didn't want to interrupt our conversation.

This is a nice place.

"Go on. Drink up."

"Don't tell me what to do."

"I'm gonna enjoy the meat."

I picked up a piece of steaming-hot meat, a thin layer of grease glistening on its surface. Its juices filled my mouth as I bit into it. It had been stuffed with herbs before being cooked, and they really enhanced the flavor.

"Wait, gimme some."

Harol grabbed a piece from the plate, not wanting to fall behind.

In no time at all, he'd cleaned his morsel down to the bone and was reaching for another piece. He finished one piece after another, until eventually the plate was empty.

Harol had lived up to his boasts about being a strong drinker by this point because he'd finished his tankard of liquor.

"Phew. G'stuff..."

Ten minutes later, Harol was facedown on the table, fast asleep. A good drink and a stomach full of food was enough to put anyone to sleep. He was in good physical shape, so I didn't worry about him catching a chill sleeping here.

"Excuse me," I called to the waitress.

"Coming. What'll it be?"

"Do you have anywhere you can put this guy until morning?"

"Oh, that's not a problem."

Really? I'd expected her to frown, but she sounded happy to take care of him.

"He's not dangerous. If you've got a storeroom where you keep trash, he'll be fine in there."

"Harol's actually one of our regulars. Though he hasn't been around lately..."

The waitress looked a little sad.

If Harol had a good reputation here, it was probably because he and his whole crew often came by to drink heavily. That crew was dead now though.

“I’ll be back to fetch him in the morning.”

“Ah... Okay.”

“Oh, and...do you have a dustpan and brush?”

“Oh...? You don’t have to clean the floor yourself, sir.”

“It’s not for that. This guy’s a mess, so I figured I’d give him a trim while he’s sleeping.”

I lifted Harol off the table by his armpits, lowered him from his chair to the floor, then I drew my dagger from my pocket.

“Ah!” the waitress shrieked.

“Don’t worry, I won’t hurt him. I’m just giving him a shave.”

After using the water I’d been drinking to wet the hair on Harol’s chin, I gripped him by his hair and ran the blade across his skin.

His bristles were thick enough to quickly ruin any razor, but the sharp blade of my dagger made short work of them.

The waitress laughed. “Won’t he mind?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

I kept swiping the dagger around Harol’s chin, then moved up to the hair on top of his head. I decided I’d leave his eyebrows, but I even trimmed his ears, leaving them smooth and hairless. Then, I lifted up his head to get the hair at the back.

When I was done, Harol’s head looked like a round hilltop.

“Oh, I’ll clean this up,” the waitress said before I could sweep up the hair cuttings.

“Are you sure? In that case, I’ll move him out of the way.”

I dragged Harol away and deposited him in a storeroom.

Not wanting to go back to the governor's mansion, I decided to spend the night in a nearby inn.



The next morning, I left the inn and went back to the tavern to find Harol.

"I like what you've done with your hair," was the first thing I said to him.

His head was perfectly smooth. I'd shaved him so cleanly that I couldn't help admiring my own handiwork.

"I woke up like this. Some bastard must've..."

Harol was fuming with rage, but the waitress must've kept quiet because I'd paid her so well.

"It suits you."

It just looked weird. I'd never seen a man like him. The other customers in the tavern were sneaking glances and laughing.

"Don't even joke." Harol kept slapping the top of his head and rubbing his palm across it. It was obviously bothering him.

"Why worry about it? Think of it like a fresh start."

"A fresh start? When I find the bastard who did it, I'll kill him."

How horrible. What kind of heartless fiend would shave a man bald while he slept? We can't let him get away with it!

"Will you be having breakfast here?" the same waitress from yesterday asked, while trying not to laugh.

"Of course. Breakfast for two, please."

"Understood." She bowed her head and then left us.

When the waitress came back with our breakfasts, I gave her a silver coin.

"That includes the fee for his room."

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much."

"Real rich kid, you are," Harol said.

He'd been frowning as he watched the silver coin change hands. It must've looked like a waste to him.

"I'm making good money, yeah."

It was true that I was rich. The money had come flooding in recently when I'd sold the books made using the mimeograph and bookbinding techniques to White Birch Dormitory. Despite ripping off the students with a price of two gold coins per copy, I'd eventually sold four hundred units for a total of eight hundred thousand ruga. Subtracting taxes and material costs left a pure profit of six hundred thousand ruga, which was easily enough to buy an entire ship.

"Then help me out," Harol said in all seriousness.

"Yeah, right," I replied.

"Please. Just look at me." He bowed his head low.

I almost burst out laughing. *I don't wanna see that shiny, bald head.*

"Sorry, but I'm spending my money on a ship of my own."

"You're gonna be a sailor now?"

"No, I'll hire someone for that."

"Hire me then. Please."

"No can do," I said bluntly.

"Lemme tell you, you'll never find a better captain."

I had no idea where his confidence came from, especially when he'd lost his own ship just recently. It was like someone declaring, "I'm the best manager there is!" right after their company went bankrupt.

"I'll need someone to sail to the republic and back repeatedly."

"Then I'm perfect. I've done it six times."

Six times? That's not bad. It must've taken real guts to stick with it for so long.

"Even so, you're no good."

"Why not? You won't regret it."

"This new ship of mine's going to carry secret equipment."

“What sort of equipment?”

“Something that tells you where you are at all times, so you can never get lost at sea.”

That got Harol’s attention.

“What? You’ve kept something like that a secret? Why didn’t you tell me before?” he asked angrily.

If only I’d given him our navigation equipment, his ship would’ve been just fine.

“I came up with the idea half a year ago, but it was only a week ago that we got it working. Even now, I can’t tell you the specifics.”

“Why not? Why not just tell me, you selfish asshole?!”

Now he was *really* annoyed with me.

“I developed it so that I can carry Her Majesty to Aisa Island if I ever need to. Imagine what would happen if I told you how it works—you haven’t got the common sense to stop yourself from getting drunk in the Albio Republic and blabbing about it to everyone you meet. Before long, the Kulati would all have the technology. Then they’d be able to invade Aisa Island. What do you think’ll happen then? Try to imagine it.”

Harol frowned and closed his eyes. He was trying to picture it, just like I’d asked him.

“Can you see it?” I asked.

“Um... Yeah, I guess that’d be bad.”

He didn’t seem to have much imagination. I’d have to spell it out.

“Her Majesty, Princess Carol, and Ms. Ether would all be killed, all because you ran your mouth. The Shanti could even be wiped out because of you. They’d kill you too, but that wouldn’t make me feel any better. It’s better if I don’t tell you in the first place.”

The Kulati hadn’t appeared to have discovered celestial navigation yet, so it was best kept secret. I hadn’t tried to patent it for that very reason. There was

no such thing as a secret patent, and even if there was, I'd expect it to leak the minute I put in the application anyway.

"All right, I get it. But then who *can* you trust with your ship?"

"I've got no idea right now. Once I share the technology with someone, they'll never be able to quit. If they tell me they want to give up being a sailor, work on another ship, or go solo, I'll have to kill them. It has to be someone who can accept all that."

"Ah..."

"You wouldn't be a bad captain, to be honest...if you were willing to give your life."

"Why would I have to give my life?"

"I'm saying you'd have to be willing to die to protect the secret. That's the level of dedication you'd have to have before I'd tell you."

"Ah, I get it."

"By the way, I'm headed back to the royal capital. Are you coming?"

"Okay... Since I'm alive, I'd better let my old man know what happened."

Harol looked like he was steeling himself for that encounter. Apparently, he hadn't told his dad about the ship yet.

"I'll lend you the cost of the trip. Will two silvers cover it?"

"We're not traveling together?"

"I'll be flying back. An eagle can only carry one person."

"Ah... You're one of those knights, aren't you? Fair enough."

After I'd finished eating, I said goodbye to Harol and headed to the governor's mansion to pick up Stardust. Once I had my kingeagle back, I had no more business in Suomi, so I flew upstream, passing close to the construction site, and then headed east to the royal capital.



It was around noon four days later. I was drinking tea and enjoying a mother

and son moment with Suzuya at the residence, since she happened to be in the royal capital. But that was soon interrupted when our butler came to tell me that a Harol was waiting for me in the hall.

“Sorry, mom. Looks like some business came up.”

“You sound just like your dad. It’s always work with you two. I wish you’d find a little more time for me.”

It sounded like this was already a sore point for her.

“I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you later.”

“You’re sure? It’s a promise?”

“Of course. And you know I never break my promises.”

“Oh, really? You’ve promised we’d make up for lost time three times this year already.”

Oh... That does ring a bell...

“I’m sorry.” I hung my head and apologized like a child.

“It’s fine. But don’t go breaking promises like this when there’s a special girl in your life.”

“Y-Yes, mom...”

“You’ve said sorry, so I won’t keep you.”

That was permission to leave.

“W-Well, if you’ll excuse me...”

I left the room and went to the entrance hall where I found the guards preventing an irritated Harol from getting any further than the entranceway.

It was easy to see why they’d stopped him. He must’ve dropped by his home because he wasn’t dressed in rags like a homeless man anymore, but it wasn’t a huge improvement. He’d also put on a large wool hat to hide his bald head.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

Being dragged away from my mom had put me in a bad mood.

“What? Weren’t you the one who told me to come to the capital?” Harol

replied.

“And who’s this kid?”

I looked at the boy who was standing beside Harol. He looked about the same age as me.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Gora Hanyam,” he said with a bow.

“I’m Yuri Ho, though Harol probably told you that already.”

I sensed Gora was a quiet boy, but with his slender-yet-muscular body and tanned face, he still looked like a sailor.

“He’s my navigator,” Harol said.

Huh...?

“Wasn’t your navigator an old man?”

“Yeah, Gramps... He died. He didn’t make it back. I thought we’d both made it when I saw the shore...” Harol looked like he was reliving painful memories.

Ah... That explains it.

I’d wondered why the two weren’t together. Only Harol had made it back alive.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

Gora’s face darkened. He could only have learned about the news today or yesterday. “Don’t be,” he said.

“Don’t judge Gora here by his looks. Gramps vouched for him.”

I gathered that this boy had been trained by the old man.

“If he’s the old man’s apprentice, why wasn’t he on the ship?”

It didn’t make sense that he’d be sitting at home while his master went off on a major voyage.

“He had to stay behind because his kid was being born.”

His kid? As in a baby?

“What? Wait, how old is he? He looks about my age.”

“Um, you’re sixteen, right?” Harol asked Gora.

“Yes. I turned sixteen this year.”

Sixteen?!

“You’ve already got a kid?”

“Yes. Though I’ve only been married for a year.”

Hold on a minute. I haven’t even lost my virginity. Meanwhile this rascal didn’t just lose his, he got married and made a baby. Imagine being a father at sixteen... He must’ve been in a rush to try everything the minute he hit puberty. I can’t believe I took him for a quiet kid just now. He won’t even be an adult for another four years. Maybe if he was a meathead like Dolla, I’d have said, “Yeah, he looks like the type.” But a kid like him... What’s the world coming to?

“O-Oh, b-but enough about that,” I said, trying to play it cool. “What are you doing here? Are you both about to invite me to lunch, or what?”

“No. I decided I’m willing to give my life.”

Yeah, right.

“Are you, though? No offense, but talk’s cheap.”

“I’m not just talk. I swear to Yeesus.”

Swear to your god all you like, I’m not buying it when you’ve been following the religion for all of five minutes. But wait, on second thought...

“Well, if you really mean it...” I said.

“Aw yeah!” Harol clenched his fist and struck a victory pose.

Not so fast.

“Let’s go talk to Ms. Ether.”



When we entered Ms. Ether’s office, the place where she prepared her Kulatish lectures, she gave us the usual warm welcome.

“Oh, Yuri and Harol. Harol, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you.”

The mood in this room never seemed to change.

“Apologies for my not keeping in touch,” Harol replied. As always, he found the strangest choice of words to address Ms. Ether.

“Oh...?”

Ms. Ether was a little taken aback when she noticed the state of Harol’s head. He’d always had long hair, so it looked odd when there was nothing protruding from his hat.

“Sorry, Ms. Ether, but please don’t ask about Harol’s hair,” I said.

“Ah, yes, you’re right. I understand.”

I wasn’t sure what she thought she’d understood, but she nodded in agreement.

“And who might this be?” she asked.

“This Gora is, at this time, a humble servant,” Gora replied.

“This Gora”...?

“Nice to meet you, Gora. I’m Ether Vino.”

“Nice to meet you too. I’m Gora Hanyam. I have heard much about you.”

Harol must’ve told him about her.

“Now, please tell me what occasion brings you all here today,” Ms. Ether asked.

She’d correctly guessed we were here for something special because we’d come as a group.

“We were hoping you might help Harol here carry out a sacrament,” I said.

The sacraments were sacred rituals carried out by adherents of Yeesusism. Baptism, confession, marriage, and holy guidance were sacraments collectively known as the grand mysteries. These were the rituals that average adherents were most familiar with, though there were a whole host of others that were used in specific situations.

“Very well. There are many sacraments, though. Which did you have in mind?”

“The oath sacrament.”

“The oath sacrament... You mean the ritual where a clergy member bears witness to an oath made to Our Lord?”

“Can you perform it?” I asked.

“Of course. The Me Sect incorporates the practices of old.”

The way “Me Sect” casually rolled off her tongue scared me a little. Plus, I had no idea what “the practices of old” were.

“Would it be too much trouble?” I asked.

“Is it for you, Yuri?”

She appeared reluctant, and it was no wonder—it would be meaningless for anyone besides an adherent of Yeesusism to take part in a sacrament. For her, my request was probably like asking a Shinto priest to bless a mosque’s construction site. The priests would probably worry about angering the god of the land.

“Harol has a little promise he wants to make.”

“Oh, it’s for Harol. Yes, that’s no problem.” Ms. Ether nodded as all the doubts on her face faded.

That’s cute.

Ms. Ether had no qualms about performing rituals for Harol because, in her mind, he was a devout adherent. She rose up from her chair just slightly so that she could face him.

“But Harol, do you understand what this means? To break the promise made during an oath sacrament is an affront to God, and I’m sure you realize that you’d be condemned to roam through Dise in death. You mustn’t approach the sacraments lightly now that you’ve been baptized.”

“My understanding of that is full,” Harol replied.

“Very well then. Now, please tell me exactly what your oath will be.”

What? We’ve gotta tell her?

“Do we have to tell you everything?” I asked.

“Yes. It would be irresponsible for me to perform the ritual otherwise.”

Ah, that’s the issue.

“I see...” I muttered, then paused to think.

“But rest assured; this is as confidential as a confession. Telling it to others would run counter to my faith.”

Hearing that made me feel better about telling her. Hell would freeze over before Ms. Ether went against her religion. Ms. Ether’s faith certainly wasn’t a five-minute affair. Even if tortured, she’d never give up the secrets she’d sworn to keep; I trusted in her.

“All right. Let me explain,” I began.



“I’m no court judge, but it sounds to me like Harol would be bound to your service for the rest of his life. That seems unfair. Will that really be necessary to protect your secret if Harol is sworn to secrecy anyway?”

Ms. Ether was referring to a clause in our contract that made it impossible for Harol to quit the company.

I’d only put that in to scare him, so I had doubts about it too. There was no law against contracts like this one, but it would mean robbing him of the freedom to choose his career for the rest of his life.

If I could fully trust him never to share the technology with anyone, then there was no need for him to stay with the company forever. Unfortunately, I didn’t have that sort of faith in him.

People were all motivated by self-interest. He could easily forget about our agreement. I didn’t believe there was a person alive capable of staying true to another for an entire century without a single transgression. Holding an employee to that sort of standard wasn’t a reasonable way to do business.

There was a trade-off here that meant it didn’t always pay to be careful. If I was too cautious about taking on new employees, it would limit how quickly I could expand the company, and being picky could cause me to miss important opportunities.

Coming to Ms. Ether to perform an oath sacrament was a means of strengthening my trust in Harol.

“Now that you mention it, you’re right. I probably shouldn’t worry about a devout adherent of Yeesusism like Harol.”

I agreed to strike out that particular clause.

“Yes, of course,” Ms. Ether said. “Harol is one of my followers.”

Huh?

“‘One of’? Do you already have others?”

I’d been visiting her office for a long time, and I’d never once seen another follower here besides Harol.

“Yes. Before coming here I... Oh, but most of them died as martyrs.”

Ah, she had Kulati followers before going into exile.

“Oh, I see... I’m sorry for asking.”

They’d probably died while trying to make it out of the Papal State. I should’ve guessed as much without needing to ask that thoughtless question.

“No, it’s my fault,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“My followers protected me. They gave their lives so that their teacher might live. I’m ashamed to admit it...”

Unsurprisingly, it all weighed heavily on her.

“Your martyred followers entered the netherworld knowing that they’d saved you. I’m sure they went to the next life proud and free from remorse.”

Yeesusism taught that the souls of the dead lived on in a place called the netherworld. It was like a sort of another world, with its own mountains, rivers, and cities. The dead would go there and live ordinary lives, but it was a place governed by spiritual laws that ensured those who’d been wicked in their past life would find no peace. In the real world, we could walk to fertile land, or even climb to Everest’s peak by physically moving from one place to another, but that wasn’t the case in the netherworld.

Those whose souls were tainted by the misdeeds they'd committed in a past life felt unbearable pain if they tried to approach fertile ground, and they couldn't eat the produce grown there because it tasted like dirt in their mouths. Instead, they were forced to spend their days in Dise—the faith's version of hell.

Dise consisted of cold, barren regions. Sinners there had to constantly battle with their fellow wretches and suffer torment at the hands of the ghouls that dwelt there. According to the scripture, the people living in the lowest regions had nothing to eat except rotten squids that swam through salted earth, completely untouched by sunlight, and the leaves of chameleon plants that grew in muddy water. Those were probably just Yeesus's least favorite foods.

Sinners who'd had particularly evil lives could never ascend to the highest level of the netherworld, known as Para, to kneel before God Himself; much like a human could never walk on the surface of the sun.

But there was a means of salvation. Sinners were able to repent even after passing on to the netherworld, allowing them to gradually move closer to those fertile soils.

Needless to say, Ms. Ether's martyred followers would be sitting at its greatest heights, chatting with the wisest of sages and bathing in God's blessings in a state of eternal bliss (at least, if you believed in that sort of thing).

Ms. Ether gave me a warm smile. "Hearing you say so has lessened my burden just a little. I just hope my newest follower won't break his oath."

"I shall not," Harol said, full of confidence.

"Then let's begin," she said.

I didn't actually know what the oath sacrament entailed. Though I'd heard of it, I hadn't seen it performed.

Ms. Ether picked up a small bottle sitting on her desk, removed the top, then poured the watery liquid into a glass cup. She drank it, spat it back out into the cup, and passed it to Harol.

"Please drink this."

Uh, wha...?

Without saying anything, Harol took the cup and drank it all.

Seriously, Ms. Ether?

I could guess what sort of significance this had, given that Harol was about to use his mouth to make an oath. Holding a liquid in the mouth temporarily must've been a way to put a charm of sorts on it.

Plus, it didn't look so bad when our beautiful, bespectacled teacher was the one performing the ritual. When I tried to imagine doing the same thing with a greasy old priest, however... I would just have to pray he hadn't eaten garlic for lunch, or else I'd vomit.

"Our mouths are now consecrated. No falsehoods may pass our lips."

Oh, she's talking Kulatish.

"Okay," Harol replied.

"Ready yourself, Harol Patera Harrell—the oath sacrament begins now. Harol Patera Harrell swears the following, in the face of Lord Yeesus."

Here we go. Patera must be a name she baptized him with.

"He swears that he will not betray Yuri Ho. He swears that once the method of Yuri Ho's technology for crossing the ocean has been divulged to him, he will protect the secret with his life. He swears that he will remain in Yuri Ho's employ while using the technology, and that upon leaving Yuri Ho's service, he will forget it completely and never make use of it."

Ms. Ether lived up to her reputation by translating the contract I'd written into flawless Kulatish. Even without pausing to think, she recited the words with a rhyme and rhythm that made them sound poetic.

"Do you swear these things with your sect's founder, Ether Catholica Wichita, bearing witness? By breaking this oath, you would not only wound yourself—it would also be an affront to Our Lord, and you will have turned your back on His love. Your divinity shall surely be diminished in the process."

In Yeesusism, someone's divinity was like their status within the netherworld, kind of like someone's reputation score in a video game. Too much damage to

his divinity would condemn him to roam Dise upon his death.

“I, Harol Patera Harrell, understand this oath and swear to Our Lord that I will abide by it.”

“Very well. Our Lord hears your declaration. Alleluia.” With Harol’s solemn oath complete, Ms. Ether clapped her hands together. “We’re done now. Good work, Harol.”



“Thank you very much,” I told her.

It had been an interesting ritual.

“You mustn’t forget your oath, Harol,” Ms. Ether warned him. “There will be consequences if you break it.”

“Of course. I am in understanding.”

I wish he’d stop talking like that.

“I don’t understand it at all. What would the consequences be?” Gora asked.

He’d been left in the dark all this time because he was the only one here who didn’t understand Kulatish.

Oh, you know, consequences, I thought to myself. Just the general sense of...you gotta face the consequences, right?

I knew Harol would be condemned to roam Dise in death, but that likely wouldn’t matter to him since he’d only been following the religion for five minutes. The more important consequence was that Ms. Ether would never talk to him again; he wouldn’t like that.

“Such an oath has no power over a person while they still live. The only consequence seen in this world would be my death.”

“Exactly,” I said. “It’s really just for peace of mi— What?”

Huh? Did she just say she’d die? What?!

I looked over at Harol and saw his mouth agape. He was just as surprised as me. Clearly, I hadn’t misheard her.

“Ms. Ether, I thought I heard you say you’d die. Was I mistaken?” I tried asking.

“Oh? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have put it that way. What I *meant* to say was that I might die.”

Oh... I see. So she’s not going to kill herself. But this still sounds worrying.

“How might you die?”

Give us some specifics here.

“Well, the holy law says that an oath sacrament is a ritual where a teacher agrees to bear the burden, should the subject fail to uphold their oath. The origin of the sacrament is a parable from the third passage of an apocrypha known as ‘The Gospel of Casso.’ It’s a story about how a student of the disciple Sahara renounced the religion, then committed a terrible crime. Sahara, feeling responsible, remained in silent contemplation for an entire month in front of the tomb where Lord Yeesus sleeps. He was there to consult with Our Lord. During that time, he abstained from all food. I would have to do the same if Harol were to break his oath.”

Oh, great. What have I gotten us into?

Now I knew why she’d wanted the details. The sacrament basically made her the cosigner of Harol’s contract. I’d thought it was like asking her to witness the signing, but it was much more than that.

“I would have to spend a month in silent contemplation. Ordinarily, I would be sealed within a special room close to the Holy Resting Chamber in the Temple of Holy Rest. Since that’s not possible, however, I’d choose to enter the forest instead. If I beg God for forgiveness, I might be allowed to live, just like the disciple Sahara.”

Um... Entering the forest? Does she think she can sit on some giant tree root or something the whole time?

The nearest forest was home to wild wolves. A slim woman like Ms. Ether wouldn’t last a week, let alone a month.

“And you won’t be able to eat or drink the whole time?”

“No, I’d be able to drink water.”

That was hardly reassuring.

“But aren’t these beliefs from Catholica? Does the Me Sect really make people do that?”

“Modern-day Catholica teaches that a tribute—basically a fine—should be paid instead. The teachings of Me are based on the Catholica of about five hundred years ago. Although ‘The Gospel of Casso’ isn’t considered canon, my research suggests that it’s authentic, and the sacrament oath is therefore

valid.”

There’s no way out of this one, is there? I had no idea the Me Sect was so fundamentalist. Though I’ve got to wonder how Catholica can let everyone off with a simple fine while the Me Sect makes people starve themselves to death.

“Please undo it,” Harol suddenly said.

“But why, Harol?” Ms. Ether was genuinely puzzled.

Oh man, there’s no reasoning with her, is there?

“I don’t want to get you caught up in all this,” Harol said.

That’s right, Harol, you tell her. Though it’s mostly my fault...

“But what’s the problem, Harol? Surely you aren’t planning to go back on an oath you’ve just sworn to Our Lord.”

Her tone of voice had suddenly changed—it was dry and unyielding. A subdued sort of anger had replaced her gentle manner of speaking. I’d never seen her get angry like this before; it was frightening.

“But...I don’t want to cause you trouble.”

“It’s no trouble. If it was, I never would have agreed to be the oath sacrament’s sacrificial witness.”

“Sacrificial witness” was obviously the special name they gave a cosigner who shared joint liability. It was surprising that she’d taken the whole thing in stride.

“But—”

“No buts. Now that you’ve sworn an oath before God, the consequences of breaking it should hardly be relevant. All you need to do is remain steadfast and unwavering in your efforts to keep your word. You shouldn’t be concerned about anything. Unless, of course, you made the oath without ever intending to obey it?”

She’s scaring me. I can tell how angry she is just from her choice of words.

“That’s not so, but...” Harol looked pitiful as he cowered before her.

“Then there’s no problem, Harol. After you kneeled before Our Lord to be baptized so admirably, I wouldn’t expect you to go back on a sacrament that

easily.”



The three of us left Ms. Ether and returned to the company’s head office, which was right in front of the Ho family residence.

“You had no idea what that ritual was going to be about, did you?” Harol asked me once we were in the building.

“How could I know it’d be so ridiculous? You think I’d deliberately put her life in your hands?”

Harol didn’t say anything.

“If you ever do betray me, just warn me first. I’ll find some way to save her.”

Fortunately, I was almost certain to learn of any betrayal before Ms. Ether did, in which case I could probably hide it from her.

“Save her how?” Harol asked.

“I could employ someone to keep watch over her, and then hold her back if she tries to enter the forest. I guess we could force-feed her too...”

Ms. Ether seemed like the sort of person who’d really go through with it and starve to death. It was possible we could feed her watery gruel while she slept. It would go against her wishes, but it would keep her alive.

“Ugh,” Harol groaned.

“But even if I keep her alive, I can’t do anything to fix the damage to her divinity, so she might not have much of a future. She could just give up on religion, but we both know she wouldn’t.”

For someone as devout as Ms. Ether, saving her life wasn’t the same as saving her mental state.

“Why’d we get her mixed up in all this?” Harol asked, full of regret.

“You’ll just have to stick to the terms of our contract. If you can’t do it, then now’s the time to back down.”

“How can I? She’ll...”

“The oath was all about our seafaring methods. The terms were written so that it comes into effect the moment I teach them to you. If I don’t teach you anything, then the oath will still be in effect, but it wouldn’t actually mean anything, so it’s like it never happened. Quit now and I’ll go tell her I decided I couldn’t trust you enough to share the secret. That’ll fix everything.”

Even Ms. Ether would have to accept that outcome. There’d be no loose ends. Maybe it would lower her opinion of me, but I’d live with that.

“Ah, yeah...” Harol said.

“Well? You’re quitting?”

If he was willing to give up this easily, I wouldn’t want to tell him my secrets anyway.

“No... I’m a man who does what he sets out to do.”

“Glad to hear it. Let’s go.”

We climbed the stairs to the building’s second floor, opened the first door we came to, and stepped into a small conference room.

Inside the room was a round table and a shoddy blackboard on the wall.

My cousin Sham was already there, slumped on the table asleep.

As always, there was an older, bespectacled student with larger breasts sitting by her side—Lilly had finally made glasses that she was happy with. Unlike Sham, she was sitting up straight.

“Hope we ain’t in the way,” Lilly said cheerfully.

“Not at all. I’m sorry for taking up your time,” I said with a bow of my head.

I’d called both of them here.

“No worries, no worries,” Lilly replied.

“These two are crew members,” I said to briefly introduce them. “This is Harol, and this is Gora.”

“Ah... I sure hope they get what we’re gonna explain to them.”

“It’ll probably go over Harol’s head, but only one of them needs to

understand it.”

“If neither of you two understand, it’ll be the death of you both. You’d better listen good.”

Lilly was right.

“Umm, these two ladies are...?” Harol began.

“These are the smart people who put together the celestial navigation equipment. The girl sleeping is my cousin Sham, and this is Lilly, the head engineer here at Ho Company.”

“Nice to meet you,” Gora said, bowing his head.

“Looks to me like Harol here’s your captain and Gora’s the navigator,” Lilly guessed.

I stayed quiet and let them do the talking.

“Yes. I’m the navigator,” Gora responded.

Lilly stared at Gora’s face. “Hmm...”

“Um... Uh?”

“It’s just that this thing here’s like my baby. I’m just wonderin’ whether I can really give my masterpiece to someone so young.”

There were two boxes, each easily large enough to be an armful, in front of Lilly. They were large clocks known as chronometers.

A chronometer measured time precisely while also being shock resistant. It used several clever methods to prevent a ship’s swaying on rough seas from having much of an effect on timekeeping. These things would tell the time accurately, even while they were being jostled around on a ship.

That was a lot easier said than done, of course. We’d been forced to come up with various new inventions while developing it, and Lilly herself had even been granted several patents. In the process, she’d needed to make numerous trips back to her family home to discuss the design with her dad, a clock specialist.

Ordinary clocks in this kingdom either used a pendulum or required the user to regularly correct the time using a sundial. More precision was always better,

but in many cases, portability was the main focus.

The situation was different for our chronometers—in fact, they were the complete opposite. Its extreme precision came at the expense of portability.

If the time used in celestial navigation was slightly wrong, the determined coordinates would also be wrong. That was why my ship was going to set sail carrying a chronometer synchronized with Sibiak Central Time. The ship would be able to spend more than a month at sea, and the time would still be in sync when it returned.

That was the sort of accuracy we needed. Our chronometers weren't so accurate that they'd be correct to within a minute after a year of use, but they certainly outperformed regular clocks. Those could go out of sync by as much as half a day after a month if they weren't corrected.

Given everything Lilly had done, she wasn't exaggerating when she called it her masterpiece.

"You're concerned about us?" Gora asked.

"Lemme answer your question with another question. Ain't you worried about handlin' it? You know how easily a clock breaks? It costs Yuri a hundred gold coins just to get one of these made."

Gora was dumbfounded. "A hundred..."

A hundred gold coins was more money than a sailor could ever expect to have, and that was the price *with* Lilly's employee discount. If it was being sold normally under the Amian brand, it might've cost two hundred.

I'd also had two produced to be used as a set. This way, if one ever broke, there'd still be a backup.

These chronometers could go wrong or even break completely if just one part wasn't oiled correctly. If that were to happen at sea, the ship would instantly be lost, and the crew would be doomed to a watery grave. Thus we needed two chronometers to reduce the rate of incidents caused by human error.

Things were cheaper when produced in higher volumes, so the price hadn't *quite* doubled, but it had still been a great expense.

We'd also gotten a fairly precise pocket watch made because it would be needed for daily use. The chronometer couldn't be carried around, after all. It would be left near the ship's center of mass. The pocket watch would be the tool that was actually used during celestial navigation, and it would be synchronized with the chronometer each day.

Together with the sextant and Sham's nautical charts, this whole thing had cost three hundred gold coins. Even Ho Company couldn't afford an expense like that without a good reason.

Caph always frowned at the very mention of this project, and our accountant, Beaule, had scarcely believed the figures. To top it all off, we still had to buy a ship. It was going to wipe out all the profit we'd made since starting the business.

The real cause for worry was that we'd be putting it all in Harol's hands.

"I'm not sayin' you have to understand everythin' down to the clock's internal mechanisms, but you'd better take this seriously."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm listening," Gora replied.

"All right, good. Now let me explain the gist of it."

The explanation had begun; Sham slept through it.



"And that's about it. The basic idea ain't so complex, is it?"

With that, Professor Lilly's lecture was over. She was standing up and holding a rod that was attached to a wooden sphere—a model of the planet.

"Ah... I've got que— Wait, no." Harol didn't finish his sentence.

"What? If you've got questions, out with them."

"I forgot what it was while I was thinking about it."

Harol was a lost cause.

"What about you, Gora?" Lilly asked.

"I'm going to need time to digest it all, but I understand the general idea."

Simply grasping the fundamentals would be enough. Given that he couldn't have been exposed to heliocentrism before today, I'd be creeped out if he'd understood it all right away.

"Essentially, there can only be one place in the world where the sun crosses the meridian at a particular angle at a particular time of day," I said, summing it all up.

If Shanti people had used a lunar calendar, it would've added whole new complications. Fortunately, we used a solar calendar.

"You don't really need to understand the theory—you just need to learn to use the equipment. Still, we'd like you to understand the fundamentals so that the whole thing doesn't feel like nonsense."

"Okay."

He's very agreeable.

"One thing I'd like to add to Lilly's explanation is that we can't reliably determine north using the planet's magnetic field."

"Using a compass, you mean?" Gora asked.

"Strictly speaking, a compass doesn't indicate north. Have you ever thought about why a compass tends to point north?"

"Why does it?"

I guess it's not that easy to figure it out without help.

"There's an invisible force surrounding the whole planet... Something that flows to the north. You can imagine it meandering across the planet's surface. The meandering is only noticeable over large distances, so it won't affect your compass between the west and east sides of Sibiak. But if you try going from Suomi to Kilhina, you might notice a big change."

"I don't get it. Why does it matter?"

"Well, if you're just using your intuition to navigate at sea—as sailors generally do—then it won't make much difference, but imagine you're traveling between *here* and *here*." I put my index fingers on two different points on the tabletop.

“Imagine that these are locations twice as far apart as Aisa Island and Suomi port—the port you normally set out from. If you’ve visited both ports and made observations already, you’ll know the latitude and longitude of each. Supposing there was nothing but open water between them, you’d want to go in a straight line, right?”

I traced a straight line across the tabletop with one finger, until it reached my other finger. This was the shortest distance between the points.

“But if you just rely on your compass, your heading will change due to the variations. You’ll end up moving more like this.”

I moved one finger across the tabletop toward the other, tracing a slightly curved line this time. Instead of my fingers meeting, the one missed the other by a wide margin.

“Now you won’t reach your destination. That’s why you’ll need to make a measurement of the sun’s position each day and correct your course accordingly. You’ll only get one chance at making such a measurement per day, so you can imagine it like this.”

This time I moved my finger toward the other along a path that zigzagged slightly.

“In an actual voyage, you might be using tacking to travel against the wind, so you’ll definitely need to make daily measurements.”

To sail forward against a headwind, it was necessary to move in a zigzagging pattern that caught the wind while going against it. This maneuver was known as tacking. That sort of thing was basic to them, so I didn’t need to explain what it meant. Tacking would always make it difficult to keep track of the direction of travel.

“You should only ever think of your compass as a rough guide. Celestial navigation is what you should trust.”

“Okay. I understand that.”

“The flow of force that moves a compass needle doesn’t change much over time. If we use a map to record the magnetic deviation at various locations, we’ll eventually be able to use it to estimate the deviation specific to any given

location. Then you can find your actual heading by subtracting the deviation from the compass reading to correct it.”

“But if we can’t rely on a compass in the first place, how do we ever know which direction is which?”

Gora was asking for a reliable basis, but that should’ve been common sense for a sailor.

“That’s the same as it ever was—the North Star.”

“Ah, I get it.”

He did, of course, know about that.

“The North Star is always to the north. Hopefully Lilly’s earlier explanation will make it clear why it can only be at true north. The fact that it’s precisely there is the very reason it doesn’t move. It’s an ideal basis point.”

“I understand.”

“If Professor Yuri’s done with his lecture, maybe you ought to practice a little,” Lilly suggested.

They practiced until sunset by sitting on a chair in a fixed position, using a horizontal rope affixed to the wall as the horizon, and a piece of round paper on the ceiling as the sun.



Once I’d finally gotten rid of those two, I was free for the rest of the day.

“Sham’s still asleep,” I noted.

She’d woken up once, but then quickly drifted off again. She must’ve been exhausted, because she hadn’t woken since.

“She’s been workin’ hard on makin’ some corrections lately.”

“Ah, I see. Makes sense.”

Was she up all night making the charts?

“It’d be trouble if she messed it up. I’ve been takin’ care of her, but now she’s fully nocturnal.”

"I appreciate the hard work. Sounds like I gave you both a lot of trouble."

Meanwhile, I've been sleeping soundly each night...

"Seein' how Sham is, can I...bring her to your place to stay the night?"

Huh? Why'd she sound so hesitant? My place is Sham's place too. How could I say no?

"Of course."

"You're sure? That's real good of you."

"Uh, yeah..."

Sham's part of the family. It's her home as much as it's mine.

"I can carry Sham," I told Lilly.

"All right. I'll let you handle her."

"Come to think of it, I haven't lifted up Sham in a long time."

I put my arms around her, then hoisted her up like a new bride. She really *was* light—it didn't feel like I was carrying a whole person. I had to wonder whether she was eating properly.

I carried her down the stairs like that. On the way out of the building, I passed by Beaule. She was staring intensely at an abacus as usual.

I left the building and headed to the Ho residence directly across the street. The guards at the main gate greeted me as I approached, then let us in through a side entrance.

Whoops. I forgot to say goodbye to Lilly.

"Thanks for your help today, Lilly."

Ah, wait—it'd be rude to leave her here.

"I'll take you back to White Birch as soon as I've dropped off Sham."

"Huh? But you said I could stay."

What? I did?

"You're awful mean sometimes. I asked if I could come here with Sham, and

you replied all happy like, 'Of course!' Now you're tellin' me to get lost..."

She hung her head in disappointment, though it looked a little like an act.

"S-Sorry. I misunderstood. If you want to stay here, that's absolutely fine."

It made no difference to me. This was a chieftain family's residence. It was big enough for one or two of Sham's friends to stay the night.

"Thanks for lookin' after me!"



Once I'd had something to eat and taken a bath, I went to my room.

I called it that, but it wasn't really mine. I didn't live here in the residence, I just used one of the guest rooms.

To pass the time, I was reading a holy book I'd borrowed from Ms. Ether.

The man named Yeesus had been born exactly two thousand years before me.

He must've had some imagination if he'd thought up all this stuff himself. He went around preaching to people about how the world was created, the nature of the afterlife, and what God liked and didn't like. He also encouraged others to live by his teachings. Along the way, he did many good deeds and performed several miracles.

Yeesus had been born in a town near the Mediterranean coast in an area corresponding to Israel. The circumstances of his birth were unknown to me, but there were numerous tales about his life, which he spent close to his birthplace. Although it was all gone now, back then, there'd been a federation of city-states known as Ancient Nigroth. The language spoken there was Totish, which was also the language that had been originally used to write the holy texts.

Yeesus's religious activities hadn't been well received. Polytheism was widespread in Ancient Nigroth, and few listened to the phony-sounding teachings that he was trying to spread. It might've been a fear of being killed that made Yeesus rein in his efforts. The scripture included accounts of Yeesus admonishing his disciples for proselytizing too zealously.

In fact, Yeesus never was killed by anyone. Once he'd reached the age of forty-five, he simply said, "Now that my disciples no longer need my guidance, I'm going into that cave to sleep."

Though the scripture didn't state anything about an illness, he'd probably sensed his death was close due to some ailment. What came next was much like the tale of the Buddhist monk Kūkai. Yeesus lay on a bed prepared by his disciples inside the cave.

"You must never disturb my sleep. Never."

These were his final words before his ten high disciples sealed the cave's entrance. Given that this was tantamount to suicide, the high disciples must've sensed his death was already inevitable when they obeyed the order to seal him alive within the cave.

The high disciples apparently kept the burial site a secret thereafter. Making the wider region a holy site would've gone against Yeesus's wish to be left to sleep undisturbed, given the clamor that would come with visiting pilgrims. Perhaps they simply wanted the site of their master's grave to be peaceful. Either way, the high disciples didn't so much as breathe a word to their own students, so the location of the burial site was lost once all ten of them had died.

When it came to other matters, however, the high disciples had been less restrained.

After Yeesus's death, one of them had declared, "We should build a town for only those who obey the teachings of Yeesus!"

They had bought a suitable region of land, built homes, and constructed walls. In no time at all, the beginnings of the Yeesusism community had formed.

They reached out to the long-established city-states and demanded that they acknowledge the new city-state the disciples had built for themselves.

The city-states of Ancient Nigroth were each named after the gods from Nigroth mythology that offered the cities divine protection.

"Yeah? Which god is protector to your city, then?" one of them had asked.

“Which one...? The only true god is Lord Yeesus.”

Well, maybe they didn’t talk like that, but regardless... That was how a small city named Yohapltoki—which meant “resting place for the lost” in the Totish language—got started. It was known as Yotstof in Terolish.

The people of Ancient Nigroth were either incredibly patient or very tolerant, because they allowed the new city to exist. In the end, they came to accept Yeesus as one of the gods. The founding adherents of Yeesusism enjoyed a peaceful existence alongside the people of Ancient Nigroth owing to the religious freedom that was allowed there.

But things began to change thirty years or so later, when one of the ten high disciples that led Yohapltoki passed away.

The people of the city became conceited. They began to preach Yeesusism wherever they pleased, and made themselves the de facto rulers of villages that belonged to other city-states, going so far as to demand taxes from them. Then, as their relations with others deteriorated, they initiated a war with their closest neighbor.

The leaders of Yohapltoki must’ve been completely out of their minds. They’d expected to fight against this rival city-state one-on-one. They were oblivious to the fact that the entire region had come to hate them, and were so inwardly focused that they deluded themselves into thinking they could attack one city-state while the others simply sat back and watched.

They’d never stood a chance of winning their war. They’d fully exhausted the patience of the people of Ancient Nigroth, and the reprisals were devastating. They were invaded from all sides by every other city-state. Yohapltoki was so thoroughly laid to waste that “the rubble was scorched by the sun and the bricks returned to sand.” Salt was then spread upon the ruins.

According to Ms. Ether, the ruins of Yohapltoki still hadn’t been rediscovered. The city had been documented in countless different texts, and a plethora of information was available, but all attempts to locate it had failed. That suggested that no traces had survived the war.

Still, the city’s people hadn’t lost hope. Several direct disciples of Yeesus had survived the war, so they took the remaining adherents with them out to sea.

Unfortunately, their ship encountered a storm. But somehow, it managed to carry them all the way to the place that corresponded to Rome, where they washed ashore.

Having learned nothing from their mistakes, they began preaching their religion once more.

But unlike Ancient Nigroth, the peninsula on which they'd landed wasn't united by a single system of religious beliefs, nor was there a powerful state ruling over the region.

The people there were separated into tribes that had each founded their own nation, and they followed their own indigenous religions.

This turned out to be convenient for the newcomers. They took in a primitive people known as the Xes tribe, taught them about Yeesus, and had converted them to believers in no time at all.

This led to the beginnings of the Xurxes Holy Empire.

The Xes tribe conquered the Italian peninsula—known to them as the Xur peninsula—over the course of a hundred years, and then they used the power of their religion to build a mighty empire over the course of several centuries.



There was a knock at my bedroom door.

"Come in," I said without looking up from my book.

I heard Lilly's voice in response. "I-I'm comin' in..."

I looked over at the door.

Lilly seemed even more beautiful than usual in a thin nightgown and slightly damp hair—she must've just gotten out of the bath. I found the look attractive.

She must've gotten the clothing from the maids. The things it did to her breasts made it hard not to stare.

"Do you need something?" I asked.

"No... Nothin' much, really... Are you busy?"

"No, I was just reading this boring book." I placed the holy book down on my

bedside table. “What brings you here?”

“I just... Mind if I take a seat?”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

I certainly wasn't eager to see her leave.

Lilly sat down on a nearby chair that I'd gestured toward. I still had no idea why she was here.



Just recently, I'd developed a sex drive. I'd even found myself seriously wondering whether I should make some use out of my money at the brothels. Lilly's thin clothing left little to the imagination, as it highlighted all the right places. Truth be told, she had what I'd consider an ideal body—no extra body fat, just perfect curves. I'd reached an age where just looking at a body like that made something in me stir.

I knew how to control myself, of course, and Lilly knew she could trust me, but still I felt like she was showing a lack of caution by dressing like this after coming home with me. More to the point, I wished she'd be more cautious because this was a trial for me.

"Have you been drinking?" I asked her.

"Maybe a li'l."

She didn't stink of booze or anything, but I did catch a hint of the sweet smell of alcohol.

If she'd been drinking, then I couldn't criticize her. I figured she was one of those people who liked to undress after a few drinks.

"The smell ain't b-botherin' you, is it?"

"No, not at all."

I might've said something if she smelled bad, but I couldn't fault her if she needed something to help her relax in a strange home.

"Yuri... You ever think about how old I am?" Lilly asked out of the blue.

Do I ever think about her age...?

"Uh, you're eighteen, right?"

"Exactly."

Eighteen was old enough for her to be a college student in Japan, but Lilly didn't look that old. The combination of her mature behavior and large breasts meant that she didn't look very childish, but she still could've passed for a high schooler.

"A few more years and I'll graduate," she said.

“Oh... You’re right. I’ll be sad to see you go.”

Students could remain at the Cultural Academy up to the age of twenty-five, but many graduated sooner.

The average Knight Academy student was from some backwater chieftain province and didn’t care when they graduated. Cultural Academy students, on the other hand, often made their career in a big city and preferred to graduate early to get a head start.

Knights belonged to the warrior class, and a successful career was difficult unless a war broke out. It was possible for them to find some success if they demonstrated a talent for internal politics, but most lived their lives without any real occupational aspirations. It was really only the Ho family’s knights that had a history of heading out on expeditions; most didn’t worry about achieving much at all.

Many Knight Academy students who could’ve graduated sooner chose instead to hang around until they reached the age of twenty-five, ensuring they got the most out of their comfortable academy life. Graduating sooner wouldn’t affect their life much in the long term anyway.

Lilly wouldn’t suffer any major setbacks as a result of graduating later—she wasn’t going to be competing in the rat race of the city, after all—but there were other reasons why graduating quickly might’ve been a priority for her.

“Thing is, I don’t wanna give this up...”

She looked unhappy, but something about the atmosphere of the room made it so her sad expression enticed me even more.

“You mean your life in the capital?”

“Yeah...”

I could understand how she felt. Lilly was clearly enjoying the quality of life here. She’d probably be bored once she went back to the countryside.

People like me knew how to appreciate a quiet life, but not everyone had love for plants and the natural world.

“Why can’t you continue living here in the capital while someone else handles

your responsibilities as custodian? I don't know how long Ho Company will be around, but the wages we pay keep improving."

The cost of living was fairly low within the kingdom's countryside; even more so when it was out in the middle of nowhere, like on the far side of the mountains.

Custodians of small regions weren't able to collect much in terms of taxes. If someone else was entrusted to manage the region, it wouldn't matter if they did a poor job—the wages from Ho Company, paid as a lump sum in cash, would cover the shortfall.

"It ain't that easy. The chieftain family we serve would have a thing or two to say."

That was news to me. My own family wouldn't have complained, so long as her tribute was always paid. From a chieftain family's point of view, a custodian was like a tenant paying rent for the land, making it an advantageous relationship.

The people who lived near the mountains were all poor, so they probably envied the Amian family and its watchmaking business. Likewise, knight families generally looked down on custodian families and wouldn't take kindly to seeing them grow richer than themselves.

"That's a tough one..."

I always appreciated Lilly as a talented engineer, and more importantly, she was Sham's friend. I wanted to help her however I could.

"You ever think about marriage, Yuri?"

"Marriage?"

This was a sudden change in topic.

"Not particularly, no."

"Well, if you ain't got anyone else in mind, then, you know... There's me..."

Huh...? Wait, what? She can't mean that.

"There's...you?"

“Yeah...”

She rubbed the back of her neck and seemed to shrink with embarrassment. It certainly looked cute, but it wasn't like her to behave this way.

She'd marry me...?

“Ummm...”

I couldn't think of anything to say.

“I'm just sayin', think on it. Supposin' you don't find someone else.”

Oh, I get it. It's just something to bear in mind. Like if I never find someone to marry.

Assuming I was going to be head of Ho family, a marriage between me and Lilly would solve all the problems related to her being a custodian.

“I'll bear it in mind,” I said.

I guess it's an honor that she offered; it's something to consider if I'm ever sad and lonely.

“B-But...” she began.

“Yes?”

“If you're interested...I could give you a little sample tonight, maybe...”

Uhh, what does she... Sample? Is she offering to let me do whatever I want to her right now? With that body of hers that I'd be staring at and drooling over if I wasn't using every ounce of self-control already?

“Would it be your first time, Lilly?”

“Y-You know it'd be my first!”

That was loud. So it would be her first time...

“In that case, you might not know that men can be like untamed animals. Any guy who accepts an offer like that from someone as beautiful as you isn't going to be content with just a small sample.”

“Oh, really...?”

“I'd pounce on you like a wolf capturing an innocent lamb and do all kinds of

things to you. You're sorely mistaken if you think I'd just fondle your breasts—I'd lose all self-control and then I'd ravage you until morning came."

I've been celibate this whole time, after all.

"Uh..." Lilly looked down with her face turning red.

"So think carefully before you say that sort of thing," I warned her.

I had to wonder whether Lilly had come up with this "free sample" thing because of the harmful ideas that certain books had been putting in her head. It was likely.

I was probably doing all kinds of damage to the youth because I was the one publishing that stuff.

"I did think carefully..." she mumbled.

Nice to know she's thinking, but...I wish she wouldn't push her boobs together between her arms while saying it.

Lilly wasn't wearing a bra, and faint outlines had begun to appear through the fabric of her clothes.

"If it's you, then I wouldn't mind so much," Lilly said.

I gritted my teeth. My rationality-driven head and my pleasure-driven lower body were locked in a fierce battle in my stomach. The carnal urges of the lower body were stronger. They fought until they'd taken control of everything up to my shoulders, threatening to overthrow my rationality completely.

"Y-Yuri..."

"I...I can't. It's a very tempting offer...but you shouldn't give up your virginity so easily. You should save yourself for someone special in your future."

"My future?" Lilly sounded sad. "I'll get hitched with some guy I've never met the minute I go back home. It ain't worth saving..."

"Don't give up hope like that. I'll figure something out. At the very least, please don't sleep with someone you don't even care about."

"I wasn't goin' to..."

"Everything'll work out. Now, please go back to your room," I said somewhat

forcefully. “Seeing you dressed like that is driving me crazy.”

Now that I’d decided to turn her down, there was no point in hearing her out. I’d only be doing further damage to myself in the process.

“F-Fine... Sorry, Yuri. I was actin’ awful weird just now.”

“No need to apologize. I’m flattered that you offered.”

Lilly stood up and headed for the door. As she looked back, the thin fabric of her clothing tight against her skin, I caught a clear glimpse of the outline of her waist and shapely hips.

Nnnnghh... Why must I endure such trials?

Lilly opened the door and stepped outside. After taking one last look back, she disappeared.

My lower regions refused to settle down after she’d left. My head felt so hot that I began to seriously consider making my first visit to a brothel that night. But after thirty minutes of careful consideration, the idea of getting dressed in the middle of the night and sneaking out through the locked front entrance felt so wrong that I gave up on the idea.

There was no way to gather information on the services and reputation of each brothel at that moment, so I wouldn’t have known which one to visit anyway. Further deliberation with a cool head also made me realize that brothels were undoubtedly witch territory, so showing up without some careful preparation wasn’t a smart idea.

In the end, I simply climbed into bed. I considered taking care of things by myself, but I knew it would leave me feeling empty.

As I lay in my bed, wracked by torment, the room door slammed open violently.

“Now what?!”

I sat up and looked over to see a figure illuminated by the night-light. It was Sham. For some reason, she looked angry with me.

Jeez, good thing I didn’t take my pants off. But doesn’t she know how to knock?

"It's kinda late, Sham. Do you need something?"

"I don't need anything from you, Yuri," she replied sharply.

What in the world? What have I done?

"What are you so angry about?"

"What did you do to Lilly?"

Huh?

"I didn't do anything."

If I had done something to her, well, I'd still be appreciating her boobs in bed right now.

I'd passed up on that opportunity. That was why I was lying in bed all alone, feeling all hot and bothered like this. Never in all of history had anyone had a better alibi.

"Lilly made a weird noise, and it woke me up."

Weird noise?

"She was crying by herself. 'Yuri thinks I'm a hussy... I want to die...' Like that."

Um... My only thought was that she had a hot body. I didn't think she was a hussy. I mean, she's a virgin, so...

"I've never seen her like that," Sham continued. "I thought you must've done something."

"Don't worry. She'll be back to normal in three days."

Probably.

"She will? So you didn't do anything to her?"

"Not a thing."

"You didn't do any dirty stuff with her?"

*Never thought I'd see the day when Sham starts talking about "dirty stuff."
What's the world coming to? This must be how a father feels when his daughter finds her first boyfriend.*

“I did *not*.”

“Okay... Well, that’s all right, then. Good night, Yuri.”

Sham left, closing the door behind her.

II

I was at Sibiak Port early in the morning.

“Take care,” I told Harol.

“Will do. See you.”

Harol boarded a ship via a plank that stretched between the deck and the pier.

The wooden ship was an old vessel that had been through a lot, as evidenced by the cracked and deteriorating hull, and the paint that was flaking off here and there.

We’d rented it, so there’d be a fine if we didn’t return it.

Harol had said that if we were going to buy a ship, he wanted a new one made by the Kulati. I got the impression that their shipbuilding technology far exceeded ours, so I’d agreed with him. Unfortunately, it meant that Harol would have to initially set out on an old ship rather than a new one.

We hadn’t told the crew, but almost all of the disposable company income had been amassed, converted into gold bars, and stored in the ship’s hold. In terms of Japanese currency, this run-down vessel carried between eighty and a hundred million yen’s worth of gold. A risk management specialist would’ve had a fit.

This piece of junk was good enough in Harol’s estimation, but I’d stand to lose everything if it proved less than seaworthy and sank.

Among the newly hired sailors were some that had actual experience with making the trip to Aisa Island and back. In other words, we’d chosen people with nerves of steel. Even so, there was no guarantee they wouldn’t mutiny.

Another problem was that I didn’t actually know the latitude and longitude of

Great Britain, so this first voyage was a gamble. Fortunately, if they knew their own coordinates, they wouldn't get lost and go around in circles, nor would they get turned back around without realizing. They also had the option of coming straight home when their food stocks were half depleted.

Still, all of these safety measures weren't enough to stop me from feeling anxious. Everything would fall apart if Gora couldn't make his measurements accurately, and there was still a reasonable possibility that they'd run aground and sink.

Once Harol was aboard the ship, he yelled, "All right! Set sail!" and gave the signal for the mooring rope on the pier to be removed.

An oar-driven tugboat helped our ship get started by slowly pulling it away from the pier, then the sails went up. Once they'd caught wind, the ship gradually sailed off, taking Harol with it.

I'd been spending all my time helping Harol prepare. Now that he was gone, I was cut loose from all my usual tasks.

Will he make it back with a brand-new ship full of goods?

The question filled me with dread, but there was no point in worrying about it now that the ship had left.

I trudged along the city streets, instinctively making my way into the academy grounds. I had no business here since it was a holiday, but there was no other place for me to be.

"I guess I'll go back to sleep," I muttered to myself.

I decided I'd take a nap. Spring had come around while I'd been too busy to realize that the season of change was upon us. I realized that the sun's rays had warmed the air enough for me to sleep outside. There'd been no rain for the past two days, so the ground was dry too.

Maybe there's a tree I can sleep against...

I entered the woods that took up half the academy grounds and looked around for a suitable spot. I sat myself down among the roots of a tree that was in the sunlight and leaned back against the trunk.

No way can I sleep on a bed this hard, I told myself. Nonetheless, I was tired enough that I soon ended up drifting off.



I dreamt that I was a high schooler in my old life again, and I was listening to one of my grandfather's lectures in his house.

With what remained of my self-awareness, I was a little surprised that I could still remember him after all this time.

"There's this thing called the uncertainty principle. I don't really get it, but physicists say that it's impossible to completely know the state of a physical object."

He'd already retired from his job at the college at this point, but he still loved lecturing his grandson. I was a good listener, and I was sure he liked to dote on me.

I was in my third year of high school and physics was one of my best subjects, so I probably understood the concept and implications of the uncertainty principle better than he did. His specialty was economics, which often used math for analytical purposes, but was otherwise a very different field.

I loved my grandfather's scholarly nature. Since I didn't get along with my dad, I was close to my grandfather instead. In fact, I'd wanted to be an academic just like him. By the time I'd finished my science degree course, I was completely set on that path and looked for a job at a college.

Though high schoolers were half grown up, they lacked experience, so maybe I shouldn't have blamed myself for being so blind to my own needs.

The outcome seemed predictable in hindsight. I'd gotten a big decision in life wrong by chasing dreams instead of sticking to what I was good at. I turned out to be ill-suited to academic life. Later, I performed research I wasn't cut out for at a college where I didn't fit in, and accomplished very little in the process.

When they finally kicked me out and ended my academic career, I didn't feel a sense of loss—I had no desire to go back anyway. I felt more like a man who'd married the wrong woman and been given a sense of freedom once he'd finally divorced her.

“Without an accurate understanding of the most elementary aspects of a system’s state, we can never fully understand the totality that the accumulation of these elementary aspects gives rise to. That means that even physicists can never reach a full and accurate understanding of the world. In that respect, I think natural science and economics are much alike at their core.”

My grandfather was talking about the observer effect. When observing an elementary particle such as an electron, the electron’s state changes as a result of the observation, making accurate measurements impossible.

Shining a light onto a bronze statue in order to observe it wouldn’t do anything to the statue, but imagine if the light was an ultra-high output heat ray that completely melted the statue. It would be impossible to know what it originally looked like.

This situation became the reality when observing an elementary particle whose state was easily changed by a tiny amount of energy. Since the very process of making the measurement destroyed the original state, it became impossible to know what the state was prior to the measurement. This meant that all recorded observations of elementary particles would contain some error.

“Economics is the study of the daily lives of a collection of individuals. The ultimate goal is to build models that predict changes in society with high accuracy. But everyone is unique. Everyone lives life in their own way. Could humans ever create a model that accurately predicts a society made of hundreds of millions of such people?” he continued.

Economics took many forms, but this had probably been my grandfather’s ultimate research goal.

His specialty was an interdisciplinary field known as behavioral economics. This field dispensed with simplified models of “rational economic agents.” Instead, it tried to apply psychology and realistic analysis of human behavior to economic models.

“I’ve lived with your grandmother for decades, and there are still things I don’t understand about her. You can never truly understand another person, and society is made up of hundreds of millions of them. If we’re talking about

international society, then it's somewhere between five and six billion. If I can't understand my own wife, who I've lived with for all these years, how could anyone ever get a proper understanding of society in the short span of a human life?"

He sounded as though this whole issue made him unhappy.

To an underachiever like me, my grandfather was a shining example of success and academic achievement. But the idea apparently looked quite different in the eyes of a scholar like my grandfather.

For him, it was all about how much value could be found in the facts he'd brought to light as he crawled through the boundless darkness of undiscovered truths; that was the measure of an academic's worth. My grandfather could find no worth in his life's work, despite all the recognition that society afforded him.

At least, I suspected that was how he saw things. After all, he took pleasure, not pride, in explaining things to me. He would also often tell me, "I lost my way as an academic."

Trade was always the most prominent aspect of economics, so people tended to think it was all about the movement of money. In truth, the subject actually dealt with all the economic activities of human beings, including things like eating, drinking, and dwellings.

Though I wanted to be a scholar like my grandfather, I decided that studying the lives of others as a social scientist wasn't for me.

My grandfather left his job at the college once he'd reached retirement age. After that, he had little to do with either the subject he'd taught or with people. He even stopped watching news reports on economics and politics. Instead, he lived a quiet life with his wife in the countryside, growing things in his garden to pass the time.

Then, once my grandmother had died, it wasn't long before he followed after her.



As I awoke, I was forced back to reality. My head cleared, and I realized it had

been a dream.

I was surprised at how well I'd remembered my grandfather's face. I considered sketching a picture of it until I realized I wasn't alone—there was a blonde girl in front of me.

I only knew of three blonde girls: Her Majesty and Her Majesty's two daughters.

"Carla?" I asked.

The youngest of the two daughters was crouched before me, studying my face while her hands held her skirt in place.

"You finally woke up."

"Were you watching me this whole time?"

"That's right. For about thirty minutes."

She spent an entire thirty minutes watching a boy sleep?

I'd once returned to my dorm room and been creeped out to find Dolla staring at Carol as she slept. I had to wonder whether this was just a weird thing that Shanti people liked to do. Still, I'd never seen someone do it in the middle of the day. Surely she had better things to do.

"Get a hobby," I told her.

"You're rude as always."

"Got nothing better to do?"

"You really think I'm not busy?"

If you were, you wouldn't be able to stand here staring at a boy's face while he's napping.

"If you're busy, then state your business and get on with it."

"I'm going to go on a date with you."

Oh man. She never makes any sense. If she's so bored that she wants someone to mess around with, then why does she try to pretend she's busy?

"I'll pass."

I stood up and brushed the dirt off my pants.

This was the last person I wanted to spend time with—it could've added credibility to all the ridiculous rumors she liked to spread about us.

"Why not? Be my boyfriend."

"Why are you carrying *that* around?"

Carla was carrying a certain book under her arm—the one that Pina wrote, Komimi printed, and I sold. That meant it was about me and Dolla. I couldn't imagine why she'd walk around with such a thing in broad daylight.

"What...? What's it matter?"

There was an awkward moment as Carla realized her mistake.

"It's none of my business, but I don't think you should walk around with erotic books."

"It's not an erotic book. Have you even read it?"

I had to resist an urge to smack her across the head. *As if I'd read that thing.*

"No. I'd rather stay sane."

"You should. It's literature. I'll lend you my copy."

This girl's out of her mind. She's got a screw loose or something.

"Bye," I blurted out before running off.

Moments later, I'd shaken her off and returned to the dorm. I found Dolla eating alone in the dining hall.

It wasn't a surprise to find the place mostly deserted. A lot of people had decided to eat elsewhere today since it was a holiday, and it was also a little late for lunch. So why did he, of all people, have to be here?

Dolla was finishing off a pile of food that would've been enough for three or four normal people.

He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt that was soaked with sweat. He must've been training until just recently. That meant he'd been doing so independently, since it was a holiday. I couldn't fault his work ethic.

I asked for a meal set from the cafeteria lady. Since I'd missed lunchtime, the bread and meat weren't freshly made, but it would have to do.

I took my tray of cold food and sat far away from Dolla.

He stood up before long. I assumed he'd finished and was about to leave, but then he began walking in my direction.

Go away. Go away. Dammit. Here he comes.

Dolla sat himself down on the chair right in front of me.

"Hey..." he mumbled to me.

He was his usual gloomy self. I wasn't exactly the cheerful sort either, but this guy always seemed sad lately.

He'd probably feel better if he stopped staring at Carol's sleeping face each night and started stealing her panties instead, but I knew he had too much self-respect to do that sort of thing. Dolla could be very stubborn like that.

I was probably the only one who knew that he stared at Carol at night. I'd never told anyone, but I didn't think it was a coincidence that Pina had written a scene where he'd done almost the exact same thing to *me*. Still, Pina's fantasies had been too close to reality to be pure coincidence. She was either exceptionally insightful or Dolla was just easy to read. Everyone could feel the dark, depressing aura he gave off, after all.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Until two or three years ago, he'd trained alongside me and constantly asked me to fight him. Lately, however, he kept to himself. I wondered if he was about to return to his old ways and challenge me once again.

"I wanna talk about Her Highness."

I was wrong.

"Ah, okay."

My next guess was that he was considering confessing to her. It'd be a whole lot healthier than staring at her sleeping face each night.

"What do you think of her?" he asked.

“Me? Nothing much.”

“You’re just friends?”

“You could call us that.”

Something had to be weighing on Dolla’s mind. He looked a lot more preoccupied than usual.

“Her Highness is infatuated with you,” he stated, taking me by surprise.

Huh? Infatuated?

“What are you talking about?” I replied.

Does he even know what that means? I didn’t think this idiot had any words that long in his vocabulary.

“It’s true.”

“Where’s your proof?”

“Proof?! How would I have any?!” Dolla suddenly stood up and yelled.

Whoa, he’s losing it.

“All right. Calm down.”

“I *am* calm!”

Has anyone ever actually used that line while calm?

“Sit back down. Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Dolla reluctantly sat down again. He hadn’t quite cooled off, but it was like he’d fizzled out before he reached the boiling point.

“Her Highness likes you. I just know it.”

There didn’t seem to be anything in particular that made him think that. More than likely he’d gotten some strange notions into his head and let them get the better of him.

“I know it might look that way, given how I get along with her,” I said.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying,” Dolla grumbled, getting heated again.

“Whoa, calm down.”

“I’m done. Talking it over with you was a stupid idea.”

We were talking something over? That’s news to me.

“What did you want to talk about? You want to know how to get with Carol?”

“You’re a brainless idiot.”

I never thought *he* would be the one calling *me* a brainless idiot. Something was very wrong with the world.

Before I could recover from my shock, Dolla declared, “I’m changing rooms.”

Changing rooms? Not just staying in another room temporarily, but moving to a different dorm room? That makes no sense.

“What’re you saying? How are you gonna stare at Carol if you’re in another room?”

Dolla got so heated over his burning rivalry with me that he had to soothe himself by watching Carol’s sleeping face every night. I couldn’t imagine what would happen to him if he lost his only source of comfort. Moving to another room would be a lifelong separation from Carol. He’d have chances to come across her and talk, sure, but someone with his personality would never form a close relationship with her.

This decision could’ve turned his life upside down. If he were to seek comfort from the wrong woman as a result, he might find himself manipulated. His life would be ruined.

And obviously, he could get away with watching a roommate sleep far easier than sneaking in to watch her sleep after moving away. It went without saying, but the latter simply made him a dangerous pervert.

“If you know you’ll never be with her, then make the most of being around her while you still can.”

“But I’m worried I’ll screw up and do something I’ll regret.”

“Ah...”

So that’s what he’s worried about. He might not be able to control himself. That’s a risk, yeah.

I'd stayed in the dorm almost every night up until I'd started my company. For the past year, I'd often been away. I'd once been there acting as a final barrier that kept him in check, but now I was often gone, leaving no one there to put on the brakes. It must've been rough for him.

"That's not all—I've gotta get over my feelings for Her Highness."

"You don't have to 'get over' anything."

The truth was, someone in Dolla's position would make a suitable husband for Carol. The idea of the two of them getting together wasn't just some far-fetched fantasy.

Normally, the women of a royal family would either marry someone from the first order of the royal guard, or a son from the priestess caste—descendants of royalty that had come here from other kingdoms. In the case of Shiyalta's royal family, they generally avoided marrying men from witch families in order to keep them at some distance. Marriage might've been unavoidable if there was prior romance involved, but such cases were exceptions to the rule.

In some cases, they would marry a man from another country's royal family. Unfortunately, only Kilhina was left and there were no male children in the Kilhinan royal family. That scenario was an impossibility now.

When royal family members went into exile or sought refuge, they would sometimes be accepted into the general population of a town just like any other noble, or other times they would be taken in by a chieftain family.

But unlike ordinary nobles, a royal family member couldn't be expected to live a life of poverty. For that reason, a system was set up so that they could become religious figures on the consecrated grounds of a holy mountain. That was how the priestess caste had come to be.

The Shanti had a single, polytheistic religion, and although the population wasn't particularly devout, they deified and worshipped the natural world itself. It was believed that all seas originated from the Black Sea, which was known to the Shanti as the "Sacred Pond." People on holy mountains would face toward the Black Sea each night and pray, similar to how Muslims prayed facing Mecca.

Incoming royalty wasn't forced into a boring existence on a holy mountain—

that was more of a last resort—but many had chosen that role throughout history, and there were many religious figures with blond hair on the holy mountains.

Since they carried the blood of royalty from other countries, their sons made suitable husbands. However, none of them attended the academy since their roles were of a more spiritual nature. Put simply, they were like stud horses with no need for an education beyond proper etiquette and religious knowledge. I couldn't imagine Carol or Her Majesty ever taking someone like that as their husband.

In rare cases, they might take a husband from a chieftain family, but there had to be some special circumstance for that to happen, such as a romantic attachment, or some sort of political gain from the marriage.

As for Dolla, his father was a member of the first order of the royal guard, and he'd be a member someday too if all went well. His chances of marrying Carol weren't slim.

"Who's to say you won't marry Carol? If you change rooms now, you might ruin your chances."

"But..."

I decided to share my thoughts about this issue.

"Listen... You're keeping all your sexual urges bottled up, aren't you?"

"Wha—?!"

The question left him at a loss for words. It shouldn't have made him that uncomfortable. I'd met a rascal just a little while ago who, despite being our age, had a kid already.

"I'm guessing from your reaction that you never visit the brothels. Well, you're not thinking straight because you never do anything about those urges."

Dolla's face had grown more masculine with age. His large, muscular physique would be a little off-putting to some women, but he'd find plenty of women at the brothels who were into it. He just needed to go to one and get everything out of his system.

“That’s got nothing to do with it,” he protested.

Oh yes it does.

“Then why are you worried you won’t be able to keep your hands off Carol? If sexual urges have nothing to do with it, you wouldn’t even *think* of something like that, would you?”

Dolla remained silent—he knew I was right.

“Listen, Dolla. Maybe you’ve heard of the three human needs.”

“No.”

I was the only one familiar with the idea. It wasn’t something written about in any of this world’s books, so there was no way he’d have come across it.

“Humans have three major needs: food, sleep, and sex. Ignoring your desire for sex is as unnatural as refusing to eat when you’re hungry or refusing to sleep when you’re tired. If you don’t eat despite your hunger, you’ll lose all strength until you can’t even move. If you go three days without sleep, you won’t be able to focus on anything. Likewise, if you resist the urge to have sex, it’s a given that you’ll gradually lose your mind.” I was more or less making up this argument as I went along. “Go there tonight. You’ll feel a lot better,” I continued.

“No...” Dolla mumbled.

“Why not? You can afford a brothel, can’t you?”

“Her Highness detests places like that.”

Oh, this idiot. Who the hell cares what she detests? Sure, he might’ve been right to worry about her opinions if they were dating. No, even then, what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her. He should just do it.

“You idiot. You can’t expect women to understand men’s sexual urges. It’s your problem, and it’s up to you how you deal with it.”

“I won’t.”

Dolla looked like he was afraid of something. I expected someone his size to have more guts.

Well, there was always another solution.

“Steal Carol’s underwear, then—no, not steal—borrow. Let off some steam with them.”

“You can’t be...”

“She’ll never know. Just put them back when you’re done.”

Carol paid surprisingly little attention to her belongings. If one of her old panties vanished, she’d just think one of her servants threw it out.

“You’re stupid... That’s the most disrespectful thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Don’t be so uptight. It’ll just be something silly you did as a teenager. You’ll laugh about it when you’re an adult.”

As I was arguing with Dolla—chatting thoughtlessly all the while—I realized that he wasn’t actually looking at me. His eyes kept darting to something behind me, as if he was trying to warn me about something. He also had the most panicked expression I’d ever seen him make.

I’d let my guard down after taking a full day off for the first time in a while, but I still had enough wits about me to know I’d messed up.

Welp. Now I’ve done it. How am I gonna talk my way out of this one?

“Just kidding! You know I’m not serious. Obviously, no one would do that. Can you imagine how the poor girl would feel about it? I’ll admit, that joke was in poor taste, even for me. Ha ha...”

“Y-Yeah...”

I listened very closely and just faintly heard the sound of footsteps behind me.

“I really should’ve kept that joke to myself. I’ll think more carefully next time.”

Damn... Dolla could’ve saved me if he wasn’t so stupid. All he had to do was shout “Hello!” or “Have you eaten yet?” or something and I would’ve known she was there. I wonder how much she heard.

“Now, on to a more serious matter,” I said to Dolla in a completely different tone of voice.

“Wh-What?”

“I need a favor, and you’re just the man.”

“Sure...”

“Finish what’s left of my lunch.”

No sooner than I’d finished speaking, I dropped from my sitting position down to the ground, rolled sideways, then leapt to my feet. I kept the momentum going and ran off as fast as I could!

But just as my foot pushed against the ground and propelled me forward, I felt a sudden pressure against my neck. My collar had been grabbed from behind, and a kick was swiftly delivered to my right knee, sending me tumbling backward.

I was back on my feet in an instant, only to collapse again when kicked in the chest.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

As you might’ve guessed, it was Carol. She was looking down at me with contempt, her foot on my chest pinning me in place. Thanks to her regular training, she knew exactly how to hold me down with one foot.

I decided to play dumb. “Oh, it’s you, Carol. Didn’t see you come in.”

“You think I’d buy that? We both know why you ran.”

I continued to act innocent. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Pervert,” she spat the words out coldly at me. “Trash. Filth. Idiot. Moron. Loser. Freak!”

“That’s quite a list.”

“I don’t mind you being a pervert, but how dare you corrupt a hardworking knight-in-training? You disgust me.”

She doesn’t mind if I’m a pervert?

“You’re making it sound worse than it was,” I replied. “I was just talking things over with him.”

“Is *that* what you call it? What a thing to talk over! You told your school friend to deal with his problems by going to a...b-b-brothel!”

Don’t force yourself to say it if it makes you blush.

It seemed she hadn't heard the whole thing. If she hadn't heard the first half of our conversation, Dolla's secret was safe. Well, not that it mattered to me.

"Dealing with sexual urges can be the difference between life or death for a man. They go to brothels to stop themselves from doing something bad. It's a highly respectable practice that nobles use to prevent mishaps."

"And what was it you suggested when he said he wouldn't go?!"

Uh-oh. Now it's getting awkward.

"Hmm... I've forgotten."

"You pig."

She put her weight onto my chest via her foot.

"Ow... It was a joke."

"You said it was a joke only after you realized I was listening."

She's got me there.

"You might as well accept your fate, Yuri," another voice said.

I hadn't noticed Myalo until she'd spoken. She was standing by Carol; they must've arrived together.

"You're not mad, Myalo?" Carol asked her, seeking some support.

"Men have their own—often irrational—set of practices. Apparently, they have to deal with certain needs sooner or later."

I can always count on Myalo. She gets it.

For Knight Academy students, the idea of having access to countless dirty images online along with their own private room would've been a dream come true. We didn't have anything as ingenious as the Cultural Academy's room full of erotic books either. In other words, we had no outlet. For someone with money, a brothel was a highly practical solution to the problem.

"On the other hand, stealing underwear sounds like a rather vulgar idea to me."

I looked at Myalo and noticed she wasn't smiling. In fact, she was looking

down at me like I was something dirty that had gotten on her shoe.

“We’re going to have a little talk,” Carol told me. “I’m going to beat some sense into you.”

“Dolla,” I called out to him.

This is all his fault.

“Y-Yeah?”

“Take care of my leftovers. Consider it my apology... You can eat them if you want.”

“It’s not like you to think of others. Come on. Back to our room,” Carol said. She led me off with an iron grip on my collar.



I arrived at the company president’s office.

“Hey... What happened to you?” Caph asked, seemingly having noticed the state of my face.

“Someone pinched my cheek really hard,” I replied.

“That brat you mentioned?”

I’d mentioned Dolla in some of our conversations here and there, so Caph probably meant him.

“No. Her Highness got angry over a tasteless joke I made.”

“Her Highness? You mean Princess Carol?” Caph looked surprised. To a commoner like him, she was like a celestial being.

“That’s right. I’m here because I figured it’d be for the best if I avoided the dorm tonight.”

I’d been able to escape by running off when she needed to go to the toilet.

“Princess Carol... Wish I could meet her.”

You already did. I just barely managed to stop myself from saying that aloud. She’d been disguised in a wig and using a false name at the time.

“Her blonde hair’s pretty impressive,” I told him.

“Yeah, I’ve seen blonde hair before.”

Really?

“Was it at a holy site or something?”

Blonde hair was exceptionally rare in this kingdom, except at holy sites and the royal castle.

“No, I saw it from far off while I was going to sell goods to a store on Royal Castle Road.”

He was referring to a group of stores near the two bridges that connected the north and south sides of the city to Royal Castle Island. The stores there catered to the residents of the high-class residential areas nearby, and there were even tailors that boasted of being purveyors to the royal family. Still, the grocers sold the exact same vegetables as those in the grand market—albeit washed and sold at five to ten times the price. I associated the place with overcharging.

Carol wouldn’t walk the streets without disguising herself first, so Caph had probably seen Carla. I didn’t know enough about the royal family’s morals to say whether it was considered acceptable or not for a princess to be sighted wandering the streets.

“You must’ve seen her little sister. The older princess is more serious, so just imagine that same girl with a tenser face.”

“Oh, really?” Caph was burning with curiosity even though he’d seen her before.

“Talking about those two sisters is making my cheek hurt. I came to ask you to dinner.”

“Ah, okay. Sure.”

“Is Beale around?” I asked.

“She’s in another room.”

“Let’s take her with us.”

“All right. She’s doing good work, so we should treat her once in a while. I

know a good place.”

It was rare to hear Caph praise anyone. I was glad to know she was doing well here.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” I agreed. “I’ll trust your choice.”

“Let me handle the reservation.”

It’s a place that needs a reservation?

Caph stepped out of the office and called over a young boy. The boy went running off somewhere. Apparently, Caph had found himself a hardworking apprentice.

When dinnertime arrived, the three of us went to the restaurant where a table had already been reserved for us. It was a small place that felt like a cross between a high-class Japanese izakaya and a traditional Japanese restaurant. Although it catered to the rich, we could dine here without worrying about all the stuffy etiquette rules that nobles had to obey.

“This is a nice place,” I said honestly.

“Yes! I’ve never been to such a fine restaurant. Thank you, Lord Yuri.” Beaule stood up and bowed to me.

“There’s no need for all that,” I told her. “And it was Caph who arranged it all.”

“In that case, thank you, Mr. Caph!”

Caph simply waved his hand dismissively in response.

“I hear you’ve been working hard as our accountant, Beaule.”

“Yes!”

“What do you think, Caph?”

“She’s got talent,” Caph said earnestly.

I wasn’t sure what it meant to be a talented accountant. Given Beaule’s personality, I doubted that she was finding all kinds of creative and audacious methods for avoiding tax.

“She’s the right type,” Caph explained. “The job needs someone who can stare at a boring old abacus for hours without complaining or getting distracted.”

I’d always thought that honesty was the biggest requirement for an accountant, but Caph saw things differently. When I thought about it, I supposed it *was* a job that required a combination of intellectual work and menial tasks. Anyone who couldn’t handle that would get bored and start whining halfway through.

“She’s good at it. She can stare at a set of numbers for an hour or two, no problem,” he continued.

It was an odd sort of compliment, but a compliment nonetheless.

“I see...”

“Th-Thank you!” Beaule stood up once again and bowed to Caph this time.

“I want to give you this, Beaule,” I said while placing a wrapped package down on the table.

“Um, but I...I can’t accept this.”

Beaule was refusing it without even knowing what was inside—maybe she thought it was money or brand goods.

“It’s nothing particularly expensive. Open it.”

“O-Okay...”

Beaule carefully opened the package to see what was inside.

“Wait, is this a...?”

It was a wooden item, carefully varnished, with vertical rows that each held five diamond-shaped beads. One of the beads on each row was separated from the other four by a horizontal bar. It was a Japanese-style abacus.

“Give it a try. If you like it, feel free to use it from now on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am.”

The rows of a conventional Shanti abacus held ten beads shaped like burger buns with no divider between them. Much like abacuses could exist in four and five-bead variations, the Shanti version also had a nine-bead variant, but that was just as difficult to use.

Anyone planning to make a real effort to learn the abacus was better off using a well-designed model.

“Tha—”

Before she could finish expressing her gratitude and stand up, I got up instead and placed my hands on her shoulders to hold her down. “Don’t thank me. Repay me with hard work.”

All of that standing up and bowing looked like work in itself.

“Ah... Y-Yes! I will!”

“Now, how are our revenues looking?” I asked as I sat back down.

“We don’t have any debts, so I won’t say we’re going bankrupt,” Caph replied. “We don’t have a lot of wiggle room, though.”

We’d given up on “wiggle room” the moment I’d sent Harol off to buy a ship. It had been like a daring feat of athleticism that left us needing to catch our breath; I’d been ready for that. But we’d be in trouble if we lost the ability to pay employee wages.

“Can we still afford materials for the carpenters, at least?”

Without materials, they wouldn’t be able to work, and all our progress would come to a standstill.

“I set some cash aside, separate from the money for the ship. I wasn’t going to let that scoundrel take everything,” Caph replied.

“Good thinking.” I was thankful he’d been planning ahead. “Beaule, do you remember the figures?”

“Y-Yes. We have about thirty-five thousand ruga left in reserve. We pay out roughly ten thousand in wages a month, and our expenditure on materials for building and manufacturing is roughly twenty-five thousand ruga each month. That means that if we simply rely on our reserves, we’d be able to continue

operating until the end of next month.”

We’re really cutting it close here.

When I thought about how all of this money was being paid out of my pocket, it made me feel light-headed. But our business was bringing in eight hundred thousand ruga a year. Manufacturing was already beginning in the buildings that were finished, and we had products in circulation, so we wouldn’t be going the whole month without any profits coming in.

Our revenue would depend on the success of Pina’s new work. Thankfully, her first release had received rave reviews, so her reputation meant her second work would still sell even if it didn’t live up to the hype.

We wouldn’t be running a deficit once we got up and running, so our dwindling cash reserves weren’t a cause for despair. There were still concerns, though.

“How’s security looking?” I asked.

Unless we could ensure smooth operation, we’d never be able to sell the goods we were manufacturing. We didn’t have to worry about bandit attacks within the Ho family’s territory, where law and order were maintained well enough, but there was a fair stretch of land between us and the royal capital where our safety wasn’t guaranteed. If the Lacramanus family were to attack us, that would be where they’d strike.

For that reason, I’d decided to swallow my pride and ask Rook for help. I had guards accompany our carriages, heavy with goods, while they moved between Ho Manor and the residence in the royal capital.

“No problems to report. The manor in Kalakumo has been good to us. Lady Satsuki met with me too.”

Aunt Satsuki did?

I hadn’t seen her myself since I’d discussed my plans about moving my company’s production facilities with her. It was hard to imagine her having a conversation with Caph.

“What did you two talk about?”

“This and that. She asked me about you.”

“About me? What did she ask?”

“About how you invited me to join the company, how involved you are in the management side of things, that sort of stuff.”

Given that I was their only mutual acquaintance, it wasn't too surprising that they'd chosen to talk about me.

“Well, if it helped you two get along, that's all that matters. You'll need to make a good impression on the soldiers too. There's an inn they use while moving between posts. Treat them well there.”

“Yeah, I know. I'm making sure their drinks are the best quality. If that's all it takes, they're a bargain.”

Fortunately, the soldiers who were moving to new posts were all well-trained men joining the forces stationed in the royal capital.

I wasn't sure how much they knew about my company, though. Caph and all my other employees were commoners, so I was worried the soldiers that had been asked to guard them might be offended by the seemingly trivial assignment. If they were to think my employees weren't important enough, the new guards might go on ahead without them. Showing the soldiers a little respect and hospitality would go some way to reducing that risk.

“So no problems for now then,” I said.

All right. It's all plain sailing.

“There is one problem.”

Oh?

“What would that be?”

“Moving goods over land's too expensive.”

“Ahh...”

Yeah...

“Paper's fairly cheap to transport because it's lightweight and compact, but we'll still have to raise the price to cover that extra cost.”

The expense would be a lot lower if we were to deliver the paper by boat instead of across the land. The kingdom didn't have trucks that carried goods over carefully maintained roads—transportation over land was a difficult process involving horse-drawn carriages. It was better to stick to waterways, despite the threat posed by pirates.

But there was a problem—the port in the royal capital was controlled by the witches. The ship that had set sail with Harol the previous morning hadn't been an issue because it had appeared empty, but problems would start once we filled a ship with valuable goods.

A ship stocked full of paper would cause major headaches. Without paying a tribute to the Temper family—a member of the seven witches that controlled the port—the longshoremen would deliberately ruin the paper with salt water or steal it to sell themselves.

"We'll deal with that when Harol gets back," I said.

We didn't need to solve this problem just yet. For now, we could continue shipping goods over land.

"He might actually be the biggest problem."

"You don't trust him, do you?"

"You're naive. He's used to running his own show. He'll never be an obedient servant."

There was some truth in that; I'd had the same thought myself. But Caph was more worried because he didn't know about Ms. Ether.

"Harol won't be an issue. There's a woman he's head over heels for, and if he betrays me, he'll never see her again. I've got it all set up."

"You've taken a hostage?" Caph sounded shocked. He obviously didn't expect I'd ever do a thing like that.

"She's not a hostage. He made a promise in front of her. She's the type of person who can't stand men who break their promises. I don't expect Harol to be loyal to me, but I know he'll never break a vow he made to *her*."

I hadn't been counting on Ms. Ether saying she'd die, but I doubted Harol

would betray me even without that.

“You used the woman he loves? Not a bad idea.”

“It’s not how I normally like to do things.”

It would’ve been far better if I’d believed in him unconditionally, but the world wasn’t kind to those who were overly trusting. Especially when working in an industry where large sums of money regularly changed hands.

Caph had something insightful to say as usual. “As time passes, people forget everything you’ve done for them. If you want to work with Harol in the long term, the arrangement you’ve got is best for both of you.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” The food had arrived.

Beaule’s eyes lit up. She’d been left out of the conversation for a while, but now she spoke up. “Wow... This looks delicious.”

The plates full of steaming-hot food—a mixture of seafood and gratin—did indeed look good. Despite their simplicity, they stoked my appetite better than any pretentious dish served to nobles could have.

“How about we raise a toast?” Caph suggested.

It felt a little odd because he was the only one with alcohol in his glass.

“To Harol’s safe voyage,” I said.

“To his safe voyage,” Caph agreed.

The three of us hit our wooden cups together.

III

“Take a look. What do you think?” Caph asked.

“It’s...longer than I thought,” I replied.

We were in the southern part of the royal capital. I was now seventeen years old and looking out on a city street.

A procession of over twenty carriages had formed along the street’s length. Naturally, they were carrying goods into the capital... Oh, I should also mention

that I was the legal owner of everything in them.

This was the fruit of Harol's successful trading.

"This is all from just *one* ship. What's your plan for when we've got two?"

"Hmm..."

"It's not like we can always count on a dozen of your family's guards switching posts when it's convenient for us."

The ship Harol's traders were using was one that he'd bought after he'd arrived in the Albio Republic. The ship had been built using their advanced technology, and it was a lot bigger than the one he'd used when working for Harrell Trading. In fact, it was bigger than any of this kingdom's boats.

But we still couldn't use the port in the royal capital. If we were to engage in this level of trade there, we'd be required to grovel before each and every witch that had a longshoreman under their control and present them with a gold bar.

Ports where materials were unloaded were generally hotbeds for gangs and organized crime, and the royal capital was no exception. A few goods wouldn't cause such an issue, but throwing ourselves at the feet of just one witch family probably wouldn't be enough when dealing with a haul this size.

Things being how they were, we had no choice but to unload the ship at Suomi Port and then transport it across land the rest of the way to the royal capital. Unfortunately, the volume of goods that came from a single large ship was far beyond what I'd expected.

"How much will it cost to move this? As a percentage of the sale value of the goods, I mean," I asked.

"Beaule?" Caph turned to her.

"Um... Our total sales revenue was 256,000 ruga for the last shipment, and the cost of transporting it was...about 30,000 ruga in total."

I was so used to hearing Beaule rattle off the numbers like this that it didn't surprise me anymore, but her memory was impressive nonetheless. Since she'd originally calculated all the figures herself, it probably helped her remember them.

Thirty thousand ruga was more than ten percent of our sales revenue and half as much as the initial funds I'd used to start the company. All of that would disappear just from sending one shipment across land.

"It's that much...?" I muttered.

"Horses eat more than people. It's not surprising."

Hmm...

Caph was right. We needed to solve the problem right away since Harol was already commissioning a second ship.

If we had twice as much cargo, we'd need more guards to defend it too, since we were already at the limit of what we could handle. Caph thought that we'd have to ask my family to increase the number of soldiers changing posts, but I didn't like that idea. I wanted a way to deal with this without my family's help.

"All right. Let's try using the port in the capital," I said.

"If it was that easy, we wouldn't have this problem in the first place."

He's right about that.

"I know of a loophole we can use."

"What? You're thinking we can just load the stuff onto small boats in Suomi? That's a lot of work."

Caph was talking about loading the goods onto boats and then using those to transport everything to minor ports just outside the capital. Even if we couldn't use the capital's port, others weren't hard to find.

We could've tried doing things his way, but I knew it wouldn't go well. If more cargo was loaded onto a ship, the weight would cause the ship's draft to increase—in other words, its keel would sink deeper into the water. This meant that the ship's keel would be more likely to contact the bottom of the seabed when approaching the shore. That wouldn't be so bad if it were to hit sand, but a rock would tear a hole in its bottom.

Ports generally had piers that extended out away from the shore, where ships could dock safely, to prevent exactly such a scenario from happening. They could be found in just about any harbor.

However, the huge ship that Harol was commanding had a rather large draft, so a short little pier in a fishing port wasn't going to be sufficient. The ship would hit the seabed before it could even reach its destination.

The alternative was to put the cargo on small boats while out at sea, then carry it all ashore bit by bit. Since we had a size problem on our hands, it would disappear if we transferred everything onto smaller vessels. We could employ a lot of small ships, dispatch them separately from Suomi, and then have them unload in a fishing port close to the royal capital.

But using a fishing port would only mean that we had to worry about rights at that port. Locations further away would be beyond the witches' reach, sure, but then we'd be back to worrying about the transportation cost when covering the remaining distance on land.

"No, that's not my plan."

"Then what's your idea?" Caph asked.

"People are losing business because of this stupid situation."

I could easily think of a few examples.

"You mean us?"

"No, there's others besides us. And, as luck would have it, they're friendly with the witches."

"Okay... I get you." Caph realized what I was thinking.

"We're all suffering because of this. I'm sure I can talk it out with them."

"I think you're right."

"See if you can arrange a meeting," I said.



I was up on the stage in a room inside the Sibiak Chamber of Commerce building.

Brokers and small retailers who must've dealt with Caph in the past and wanted to do business with Ho Company—more than fifty people total—had gathered in the room.

“To everyone who deals in our products, today I would like to begin by expressing our gratitude to you.”

I spoke loudly from the stage and received a light applause in response.

“The reason we’ve gathered you here today is because our company would like to make a simple, although important, announcement.”

I calmed myself and scanned the audience. They were all looking at me, wondering what I had to say.

They knew all too well that Ho Company was in a precarious situation here in the capital because we refused to submit to the witches. Our insistence on doing things the hard way had to be a source of headaches for them, but the profit they made with us was enough to keep them from going elsewhere.

“We will be suspending all sales of our products within the royal capital, Ho paper included.”

The sounds of concerned voices rippled through the crowd the moment I spoke, and it was no wonder.

“However!” I interjected loudly. “Just because we won’t sell our products here in the capital, doesn’t mean you can’t continue to buy them.”

The room fell silent once more.

“Our products are going to be sold to the south, at our company’s office in Suomi. You can, of course, continue to make your orders in our office here in Sibiak. However, the point of sale will be in Suomi. You can make your payment here in the capital, but the transfer of ownership will take place there. In other words, you will all need to find a way to transport the goods you buy in Suomi here to the capital.”

I could see the same look of displeasure on every face in the crowd from up on the stage. I was sure everyone was thinking the same thing—*I don’t know what they’re planning, but this is going to be a massive pain*. Suomi was several days away by horseback, after all. I hadn’t expected them to like this part of the arrangement.

“We’d also like to invite you to use our shipping service that operates

between Suomi and Sibiak. Essentially, we'll be able to carry your goods here to Sibiak at a very reasonable price. However, we will accept no responsibility if your goods are lost—for example, as a result of a ship sinking, or if they go missing in the port. You are, of course, free to decide whether you'd like to use this service or not. Those who choose not to use it can collect their goods in Suomi or have them temporarily placed in one of our storehouses to be collected at a later date. Lastly..."

I took another good look at everyone.

"To compensate all of you for the transportation costs you'll incur, we're offering a ten-percent reduction in the wholesale cost of all of our products, Ho paper included. I'd now like to invite Caph Ornette to the stage so that he can explain the service and its pricing in more detail."



I left the room early. I could hear Caph's voice as he explained specifics about the cost of the service to the guests.

Our newly discounted goods meant that the transportation service was essentially free. We knew everyone would use it.

Essentially, the risk of using the ports would now be borne by retailers who had their own deals with the witches already. If their goods disappeared in the port, they could run crying to whichever witch was responsible for their protection.

There'd probably be some conflict between witch families as a result, but that wasn't my problem.

Though we'd be selling our goods at a ten-percent discount, the money we'd lose would be less than the additional cost we'd been incurring so far as a result of transporting goods across land. We'd be better off overall.

I breathed a sigh of relief now that my work was done. Speaking to a crowd had left me exhausted. I wanted to head home and rest.

As I walked through a corridor, heading for the exit, I saw someone approaching from up ahead. Not to brag, but I could clearly make out her face from a distance thanks to my excellent eyesight.

It was Julia Lacramanus, the woman whose reputation I'd trashed. I'd heard she'd graduated a year prior, so I assumed she was here on business. Needless to say, she wasn't someone I wanted to talk to, but I wasn't going to turn and run either. I simply kept walking.

The corridor was like an alleyway. It contained nothing but a series of doors leading into rooms. There wasn't much space for me to pass by her, and it wasn't like I could take a couple of right turns and then get back here via a detour either.

As we got closer, I could tell from the change on Julia's face that she recognized me.

She was walking along the right side of the corridor. I was in the center, so I moved over to the left to avoid bumping into her. But, suddenly, Julia moved over into the center, as if she didn't want to let me pass.

Is she trying to bully me?

"What's your problem?" she asked.

I was about to ask her the same thing. Move.

"Why must you get in my way?" Julia's face twitched as she spoke. "I wish you'd just die."

I've often thought that about people too, but it's not a nice thing to say out loud.

"Ha ha." Julia was laughing to herself for some reason. "Why don't you just die? You should die."

I don't get her at all. Is this just what happens when a woman who's hysterical at the best of times gets angry?

"Are you stupid?" she asked.

She didn't exactly have a way with words. Even Carol had a better repertoire of insults.

"Um... I don't know what you want, but I'm leaving."

There was no one I wanted to avoid more. No good could possibly come out

of staying here and talking to her.

“Stay right there,” she commanded.

“Uh?”

“Pampered little boys who can’t do anything on their own shouldn’t get so full of themselves.”

She’s crazy.

“Okay. Sorry,” I said.

“An apology isn’t enough. You shouldn’t be like this in the first place.”

Jula drew a long, narrow blade that she was wearing at her waist.

Whoa. She’s actually drawing her weapon.

I glanced at her face—trying to get an idea of what she was thinking—and noticed that her facial muscles were having some sort of spasm in her excitement.

Is she on drugs or something?

Jula’s sword was a tiny iron thing, no thicker than a pinkie finger, that was designed for self-defense. It reminded me of a needle. Though it was longer than my dagger, it was a fairly short weapon. It barely passed as a sword, given it was only the length of a person’s upper arm. The blade was double-edged.

“You’d better put that away,” I warned her.

“Draw yours. Aww, don’t tell me you’re scared?”

She’s just an awful person, isn’t she? Or maybe she’s just an idiot.

Perhaps she had confidence in her own skill, but if she’d actually learned to use a sword, she’d know better than to use a weapon like that. The idiot who’d designed it had put more thought into the aesthetics than anything else. There wasn’t a hint of functional beauty in either the handle or the blade.

“Look, no matter what you do with that thing, you’re not going to leave a scratch on me. Now put it away before you draw a crowd and cause a scene.”

“You really know how to wear my patience.”

“Just stop. Neither of us gets anything out of this.”

Seriously.

She sent the blade cutting through the air with a swish.

I instinctively stepped back to avoid it.

“Why are you trying to attack me?”

What’s the point?

“It’s all...your...fault. My life’s...ruined.” She swung the sword at me again and again as she spoke.

What do you want me to do about it now?

“You know you’ve only got yourself to blame,” I replied as she continued trying to cut me.

“Die! Die right now!” she cried while swishing her weapon back and forth wildly.

This is ridiculous.

She clearly had a few misconceptions about how to use her weapon, because she kept swinging it around. Her sword was designed for thrusting at an opponent like in fencing, but she didn’t try to do that even once. It was barely a threat when she waved it around at me this way.

Even if she somehow managed to hit me, it wouldn’t cut through much more than my clothes; any wounds would be skin-deep. The blade didn’t have any barbs that would help deepen the cut either. Unless she cut my carotid artery, there was no chance of her inflicting a fatal wound.

To make matters worse, the blade was double-edged. The chances of her injuring herself with it were incredibly high. That being said, I wasn’t about to give her advice like, “Hey, you should try sticking me with it.”

I started wondering whether I should call out for help when it happened.

“Oww!” Julia shrieked, holding her face.

“Ah...” I sighed.

She'd put too much power into her sword swings and cut her own cheek with it.

She cut her face, of all places... It wouldn't have been so bad if it had been a limb instead...

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Ah... M-My face..."

Jula took her blood-covered hand away and stared in shock at it.

What a mess.

Given how much the wound was bleeding, it was probably going to leave a scar. If I'd been the one who'd inflicted it—which meant a clean cut from a sharp blade—it wouldn't have been so bad, but this was a cut made by a clumsy beginner. Plus, I doubted the blade had been properly sharpened.

Jula was silent.

"Don't feel down."

It would be bad news for me if some consolation restored her enthusiasm, but I felt sorry for her anyway. If the cut left a scar, it could make it harder for her to achieve happiness in life. It was her own fault, of course, but I still found myself looking for something to say to console her after seeing her wounded like that.

Maybe I should've taken a chance and tried to catch the blade. At least then her face would've been all right.

It was a fairly serious thought. That was how much I pitied her.

"It's your fault. I'll sue."

Wait, why am I wasting my pity on her?

"Um... What exactly have I done wrong?" I asked.

How in the world can she pin this one on me?

"I was wounded by your sword," she said.

Wow... I'll bet she's one of those people who won't get up from a fall without

demanding compensation.

This was turning into more trouble than I'd thought. If I wasn't careful, I could find myself in legal trouble.

"You plan to take this to court?"

"That's right."

I knew it...

"But you were making so much noise that people in the rooms behind you came out to see what was going on, though they got scared and went back in when they saw you going wild with that sword."

"Oh?" Jula's face went blank.

"I know who they were, so I can call them as witnesses. But you didn't see them, did you? There were about ten people. You'll have to be quick if you want to find them all and bribe them into silence."

I was making this all up—no one had seen us, so I didn't actually have any witnesses to call on. But Jula had never looked behind her while she was frenzied. She had no way to know whether anyone had been watching her from behind.

"Grr..."

"Maybe you'd better talk things over with your grandmother before doing anything rash."

Not that it would help—she couldn't try to take me to court without worrying about onlookers now. Finding any potential witnesses would mean talking to everyone about what had just happened. If she were to choose people at random, they'd realize she had something to hide. Once every potential witness realized she was trying to cover something up, even a powerful witch family like hers couldn't reasonably expect to keep them all quiet.

Jula's face contorted with despair. "Why...? Why is it always me who suffers?"

Why? Feels like I'm the one who's the victim here. If you're suffering, it's only because you brought this on yourself. In fact...

“It’s because you get pleasure out of making others suffer.”

That’s what it comes down to.

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. It’s just how you are,” I continued. “But the thing is, it’s hard to go through life like that unless you’re either very smart or powerful. Obviously, no one’s going to let you make them miserable just so you can be happy.”

I hadn’t particularly wanted to antagonize her here, but she wouldn’t have been happy unless she’d defeated me. She’d feel like she’d lost unless she somehow humiliated me or made me much worse off somehow. It was the only way for her to get over her resentment; that’s just how she was.

As for me, I couldn’t afford to give Julia the satisfaction. That’s all there was to it.

“When you’re at home, you might get away with treating a maid from a poor family like this, but someone like me isn’t going to take this treatment sitting down. Why would I?”

To my surprise, Julia listened quietly rather than screaming at me.

“What I’m trying to say is that you can’t expect everything to go your way just because you’re a Lacramanus. You’ve got to pick your battles, that’s all. If you’d realized this simple fact in the first place, you wouldn’t be in this ridiculous situation.”

“I’ll kill you.”

I didn’t get through to her at all, did I? Well, whatever.

I passed her by and left the building.

Interlude — Carol and Myalo

I

Myalo and Carol were in a small, old dojo within the Knight Academy's woods.

There was no one around besides the two of them. It was a holiday, and even the serious students who often trained independently had chosen the newer dojos over this old structure in the woods. They had it all to themselves.

The pair were sparring intensely in its center. They struggled against each other, occasionally moving apart, but never stopping for a moment as the sweat dripped from their bodies.

"Haah!" Carol cried as she threw Myalo.

Myalo's body rose into the air, but the throw hadn't been executed quite right. Though her legs both left the ground, she was able to bend her knees as she touched back down safely a short distance away.

"Hiyah!"

Myalo had been able to grab Carol's sleeve even as the other girl had thrown her. She quickly recovered her balance, then moved back while gripping Carol's sleeve, attempting to pull her to the ground.

Carol's arm was soon caught under Myalo's armpit, trapping her in a hold where they stood. Carol had made herself vulnerable because she'd gotten off-balance while throwing Myalo. As a result, Myalo had Carol in an armlock.

Carol surrendered quickly. "I concede."

The hold wasn't dangerous while they were standing, but Myalo could follow up by letting herself fall forward, which would put her entire body weight onto Carol's joint and easily break her arm.

Carol was aware of this; that was why she hadn't struggled. She was sufficiently stronger than Myalo and could technically struggle free from her

grip, but that meant nothing. On a real battlefield, her opponent would have used their body weight to break her arm before she could break free. Only a stubborn fool would have refused to accept defeat.

“Haah, haah... Thank you.” Myalo bowed her head to Carol. It was her first victory in some time.

“Thank you,” Carol said back to Myalo. Then, she wiped away her sweat with her sleeve. “Phew... Let’s take a break.”

“Haah, haah... Good idea,” Myalo said between gasps.

Carol quickly sat down and crossed her legs. Though the wooden floor of the dojo was icy-cold against the legs during the winter, the frigid season hadn’t arrived quite yet.

Myalo sat down with her legs folded beneath her, seiza style.

“You can relax a little, you know,” Carol said with a pained smile.

“I just find it calming to sit like this.”

“Really...? Well, all right then.”

Carol didn’t particularly enjoy sitting in the seiza pose, so it was hard for her to imagine how anyone could feel more relaxed that way.

“You’re so quick,” Carol said. “I didn’t expect you to get me in a hold just now.”

“But I can’t seem to gain any weight... Techniques like that one are all I have.”

Myalo was very petite—she was even smaller than some of the Cultural Academy students. It certainly wasn’t for lack of training, so it had to be down to her bloodline. She was not only lean, her body seemed so small that there was nowhere for any muscle to go. That put her at a disadvantage in many forms of combat.

Her tiny frame meant she’d lose in any of the contests of pure strength that men tended to engage in. That left her with only martial arts that involved the use of a well-sharpened dagger. To complement that style of fighting, she focused on holds that allowed her to make use of her body weight instead of her strength.

Carol was also smaller and weaker than the boys, but she was bigger than Myalo. Even in the fight they'd just had, Myalo had been almost completely at her mercy due to her superior strength.

"Wanna practice some pinning techniques after a little rest?" Carol asked.

Pinning techniques were one of Myalo's strong points thanks to her dexterity and diligent study.

I'll get her to teach me a thing or two, thought Carol.

"Yes, let's. I have a technique I'd like to try."

"Oh really?"

"Yes. I've never used it because it'll put me into a position that doesn't feel right when fighting a male opponent."

I can imagine, thought Carol.

There were a good number of ways to pin an opponent down on the ground that Carol didn't like to use against the Knight Academy boys. That was one of the main reasons she liked to practice here with Myalo while no one else was around.

Weapons training wasn't a problem, but practicing hand-to-hand combat with the boys often led to some awkward situations. For that reason, Carol and Myalo preferred to practice with each other when they found the time.

The pair practiced pinning techniques for the next thirty minutes.

"Whew... Want to call it a day?" Carol asked while wiping away her sweat.

"Haah, haah... Y-Yes. Let's end here."

The color had drained from Myalo's face. This always happened to her when she exercised too intensely.

Carol never had that problem. She didn't know what it was that made Myalo so frail and her life at the Knight Academy so difficult. Myalo had tried eating a diet that Yuri said might help, but while it had alleviated some of the symptoms, it hadn't cured the root problem.

"Are you all right?" Carol asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. I just need to rest for a while... I’m sorry about this.”

Myalo put her feet together, then squatted down.

“Sorry,” Carol said. “It’s my fault for asking you to train with me.”

“No, not at all. In fact, I owe you my thanks.”

“You’re sure?”

Whether she was thankful or not, Carol felt guilty seeing Myalo pale-faced and crouching down, her head between her knees.

“You really help with my training,” Myalo said. “And this is my problem to deal with.”

“Take a break. I’ll clean the floor myself.”

Myalo looked like she was about to stand back up. “You don’t have to—”

“It’s fine. Sit down.”

Carol put her hand firmly on Myalo’s shoulder to prevent her from standing. She left the dojo to draw some water from a well. After soaking a rag in the bucket of water, she used it to wipe the sweat from the floor.

Every student had to do this after using a dojo for independent training. There were people employed to clean the area after their training classes, but not when they trained without an instructor. It would be disrespectful to anyone else who used the dojo if they didn’t clean it, not to mention the floor might end up damaged if it was left coated in sweat.

“That’ll do it.”

Carol wrung out the rag into the bucket and stored it away again.

“I’m sorry,” Myalo said, her voice tinged with regret.

“It’s no big deal. Now let’s go take a bath before we catch a cold.”

“All right.”

Myalo stood up straight—she’d fully recovered.

The two left the dojo and headed into the woods.



They soon came to a clearing that contained a small building that was made entirely from stone except for its roof.

Most students thought that this was a home or resting place for the person managing the woods, but that wasn't true. It was a washing spot for the Knight Academy girls. There was even a small heated bath inside.

The girls couldn't wash themselves with the other students after getting sweaty from training, nor could they use the same wash area that the boys used at night. Instead, they bathed here.

The woman responsible for keeping the water hot wasn't around, but the fire would still be smoldering. In fact, they could see thin smoke rising from the building's chimney, so they knew that the water had been heated for them, just like they'd requested.

There was an iron lock on the door. Carol inserted a key and turned it with a clunking sound. They entered and barred the door from the inside. They left the lock outside, because it would quickly rust from the moisture otherwise.

Inside was a single steam-filled room with a bath that was just barely large enough for three people. Even when just two girls were using it, they didn't have space to stretch out their legs. Despite that, Carol and Myalo had grown emotionally attached to this place of respite.

"Let's undress."

Carol quickly stripped off her sweat-soaked clothes and placed them in a basket with her name written on it. This place also doubled as a laundry drop-off point. Her clothes would later be collected, washed, and deposited at the dorm so that the dorm mother could carry them to her room.

The girls at the Knight Academy were only able to enjoy this luxury because there were so few of them.

As Myalo removed her own clothing, exposing her naked body, Carol examined her closely.

"Looks like you're growing too," she noted with a few nods of her head.

"Hey... Please stop that." Myalo looked uncomfortable as she went on ahead.



Carol and Myalo had known each other for seven years now, and her scrawny body hadn't changed much during that time. Myalo would force herself to eat despite her poor appetite in order to stop herself from losing weight, but her bone structure remained as small and delicate-looking as ever. Her limbs were so thin that Carol sometimes worried they might snap like dry branches.

But now Myalo's body had finally started to change. Her waist and chest had begun to fill out, giving her a curved, more feminine figure. She wouldn't be able to pass for an underweight boy for much longer.

"She's turning out nicely," Carol mumbled to herself as she headed for the bath.

She dipped a hand in the water to test the temperature, used a bucket to dump water over her head to rinse away most of the sweat, then she got in the bath.

"Phew..."

"Isn't it warm?" Myalo—who was submerged up to her shoulders—asked.

"Yep," Carol wholeheartedly agreed.

Anyone who exercised during this time of year would quickly find themselves chilled to the bone—their sweat would quickly wick away any warmth.

"I feel bad for the boys when we bathe like this," Myalo said.

"Yeah, me too."

The boys only had hot water at night, so they couldn't simply take a relaxing soak at any time of day. Their bath was large enough that ten or more boys could fit in it with ease, but that made it difficult to heat.

"If we just poured cold water over ourselves like they do, we'd be frozen solid," Carol said.

Even at this time of year, there were some boys who would draw cold water from the well before dumping it over their head, as if it was summer. They'd only stop to dry their hair. It wasn't clear whether they were acting tough or just numb to everything, but even after pouring near-freezing water over their heads, they'd calmly carry their equipment home like they felt better having

washed away their sweat.

If Carol were to try it, she'd be left paralyzed with her teeth chattering. She might even catch a cold in the process. Then again, it would never happen—she wasn't going to step outside naked.

"Heh heh, that's right," Myalo agreed. "I wouldn't want to try it."

Myalo looked like she'd be chilled so bad that her heart would stop if she did it. It wasn't a nice mental image.

"Though I don't think they're using cold water lately," Myalo added.

"No? Then what do they do?"

"I think they take turns to sneak out during breaks and heat up water behind the dorm."

Carol frowned. Breaks were a time to refresh oneself, so many students took the opportunity to wash their faces. She certainly had noticed that boys tended to slip away during the breaks, but she hadn't imagined they were going back to the dorm to prepare hot water.

Whatever hot water they made couldn't have been enough for a bath; they'd merely be adding it to the water they poured over themselves. Still, that would be a lot better than using water straight from the well.

The boys would get chewed out by the instructor if he were to ever find out. Going off to wash their faces was fine, but they weren't meant to return to the dorm. Still, Carol couldn't criticize the boys too harshly when the girls were enjoying special treatment.

"How can one boy draw enough water for everyone to use?" Carol asked. "I wouldn't have thought there'd be time during the breaks."

It was easy enough to get a fire going and leave it burning, but collecting the water wasn't such a quick process.

"Yuri put some sort of device near the well that makes it easy. You don't even have to pull up a bucket—you just move a stick up and down like this, and the water comes gushing out."

It sounded as though Myalo had already tried it for herself. She even knew

how to operate it.

“Is he still inventing things...?”

Carol’s reaction was a complicated mixture of admiration and surprise.

“I believe it’s just a prototype, but since it hasn’t broken down, I expect he’ll market it soon. Then he’ll grow even bigger,” Myalo explained happily.

The thing that would get bigger wasn’t Yuri himself, but his side business.

“I guess it’s fine if he’s doing some good through his hobbies.”

Myalo smiled teasingly. “What’s this? Weren’t you opposed to Yuri running a business?”

“I’ve grown a little too. If he’s creating jobs and making products that improve people’s lives, I’m not going to complain.”

“Eheh,” Myalo laughed quietly to herself.

“I heard he pays good money too,” Carol said.

“Yes, I think he offers high salaries, and at a time when things can be really awful.”

The influx of Kilhinan refugees had made things worse than they were under ordinary circumstances. The average salary had been driven far below what it used to be—some workers were paid so little that they were practically slaves. Even Carol had heard about it.

“Ah... You’ve got a bruise,” Myalo said suddenly.

“Huh? Where?”

“On your outer thigh.”

Carol twisted her body to take a look.

Myalo was right—a large blue patch had formed. Carol wasn’t sure how it had gotten there; there were too many possibilities.

“I’m not going to worry about having a bruise there.”

She was too used to bruises to let them bother her. It would soon disappear completely without any need for treatment. A big bruise on her forehead

would've made it hard to go out in public, but no one was going to see her thighs anyway.

"Eheh. That was a sexy pose just now."

"Wh-What do you mean?"

Carol had just gotten onto one knee so she could lift her rear up to take a look. That might've looked sexy to some people.

"I'm sure the boys are going to be all over you before long," Myalo stated while staring at Carol's chest. She spoke like she wasn't in a similar situation herself.

"I'm g-getting out." Carol climbed out of the bathtub. Water dripped from her flushed-red skin.

"Then I will too." Myalo followed behind her.

After leaving the bath, Carol wiped herself dry with a soft cloth she'd left ready. It was a task she'd gotten used to, but she'd never wiped herself dry before entering the academy—her servants had done everything for her.

"Myalo, do you have any plans for the day?"

"No... I was just planning to study all day."

"I thought I might go out somewhere. Wanna come with me?"

"Out?" Myalo asked suspiciously as she put on her underwear.

"I'll wear my disguise, of course."

"Ah, yes, I remember that." Myalo had been the one who'd bought the wig that Carol sometimes wore, after all. "You're not going anywhere dangerous I hope?"

"No, don't worry."

"In that case, I'd be happy to accompany you."

"Great. I would've been lonely by myself."



"How's this?" Carol asked once she'd finished getting dressed. She shook her

head lightly, rustling the hair on the wig.

“Impressive,” Myalo said while clapping her hands. “Your disguise is more effective than I thought.”

“Then let’s head out.”

Carol was wearing her Cultural Academy uniform, while Myalo was wearing the Knight Academy one. Since Myalo’s uniform was designed for boys and Carol was taller, the pair looked like a boy with an older girlfriend from afar.

“Where did you intend for us to go?” Myalo asked.

“I wanna check out a teahouse that’s popular with Cultural Academy students. It’s called Vogue.”

“Ah,” Myalo nodded. “Yes, I’ve heard about that one too.”

“Heh heh. It’s not somewhere I’d usually hang out.”

Although Carol had countless acquaintances, there were few people besides Yuri and Myalo whom she considered friends on equal terms.

The places she heard others talk about at the Cultural Academy often caught her interest, but she rarely had anyone to visit them with. She still wasn’t on good enough terms with Yuri to invite him to teahouses during their days off.

“Likewise. In fact, I’ve never set foot in a teahouse.”

“I haven’t either, actually.”

“Oh really?” Myalo didn’t sound particularly surprised. “In that case, it’ll be a first for both of us.”

“Yep.”

“Heh heh. Isn’t it odd? It’s such a normal thing to do, and yet neither of us have done it.”

Carol agreed completely—in fact, that was exactly why she wanted to go there. She wanted to experience the “outings” that other girls often talked about.

“From what I’ve heard, Yuri’s always visiting teahouses,” Carol said.

“Indeed. He often goes to one known as Ginkgo Leaf. It’s just outside the Grand Library.”

Myalo apparently knew all about this already. As always, Carol felt as though Myalo already knew virtually everything.

“Then why don’t we head there?” Carol suggested.

“Good idea.”

The two headed for the academy’s main gate.



“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here’s your original blend tea, water dropwort tea, roast dumplings, and smoked cheese.” After placing their tea and snacks down on the table, the waitress bowed to the two girls. “Would you like anything else?”

A pair of cups, teapots, and plates of food had been placed on their table. Apparently, this teahouse left it to customers to pour their own tea. Carol guessed that this made it easy for people in large groups to try someone else’s order.

“That’ll be all, thank you,” Carol said.

The waitress looked surprised for a moment, but then she smiled. “Please take your time,” she said before leaving.

“Heh heh. You left her a little awestruck just now, Your Highness.”

“Did I?”

“The girls from the Cultural Academy wouldn’t have thanked her like that. You sounded cool while saying it.”

“Cool? Is that a compliment?”

“Yes, it is.”

Carol had been trying to sound *cute*, rather than cool, so she felt a little disappointed. Her aim was to always act with dignity and project confidence while remaining respectful to those around her. It was a little difficult to do all that and come across as cute at the same time.

“I’m surprised there aren’t more people,” Carol noted while looking around the teahouse. “I thought we’d see a lot of Cultural Academy students here since it’s the fashionable place to be.”

The place certainly wasn’t empty, but it didn’t look particularly popular either. The only customers were a few middle-class couples sitting at distant tables.

“Well, the truth is, this *was* the place to be. There’s another place known as Far East Tea Room that’s become more popular lately. I expect everyone’s there.”

“Oh? Really?”

No way, Carol thought.

“Yes. Trends change at a dizzying pace at the Cultural Academy.”

It had only been two weeks ago that Carol learned about this teahouse’s popularity. She didn’t think it’d be old news already.

“Well then, why didn’t you say so?”

“I didn’t see a need for us to keep up with the latest trends.”

“Hmph...”

“Also, that other teahouse would’ve been so busy that we’d hardly be able to enjoy our tea.”

“Oh... Yeah, maybe...” Carol had to agree with that.

If the trends were always changing—like Myalo claimed—then Carol reasoned that these establishments were probably all as good as the next one. This place probably wasn’t any worse than Far East Tea Room; the students had simply grown bored of it and went elsewhere. If that was the case, they would’ve had a similar experience, regardless of which of the two places they’d chosen.

Still, Carol felt a tinge of regret despite her reasoning. Her plan had been to enjoy life like an ordinary student by jumping on the latest trend.

On the other hand, further deliberation told her that her disguise might not have held up if she’d gone somewhere crowded with other students. Since she was wearing a Cultural Academy uniform, someone might’ve even approached

her and—not recognizing her—asked who she was. She would’ve been forced to make an awkward retreat in that event.

“Now, why don’t we enjoy our tea?” Myalo said as she put her hands together in front of her. It was a feminine gesture befitting a young girl.

“Yeah, let’s get started.”

“Indeed.”

Myalo lifted a teapot and was about to carelessly pour the drink into her cup.

“Ah...” Carol gasped, unable to stay quiet.

Myalo stopped. “Hm? Is something wrong?”

“Uh, no, nothing.”

“Ahh...” Myalo nodded as if she’d realized the problem. “I see. I’m not well versed in brewing tea.”

It wasn’t widely known that Shiyaltan royalty didn’t leave guests to pour their own tea, but it wasn’t exactly a secret either. It was possible that Myalo had heard about that practice from Yuri.

“I’ll pour the tea today. You can be my guest, Myalo.”

“I’m honored.”

Myalo placed the pot back on the table. Carol picked it up, then poured the tea so that it hit the brim of the cup without frothing.

Water dropwort tea turned bitter when mixed with air, so it wasn’t meant to be poured from a height. Myalo’s artless method would’ve actually been harmful to the tea’s flavor. That said, it would’ve only been a hint of bitterness; nothing that would make it undrinkable. Some would argue that it was a trivial part of the process that barely affected the tea’s taste.

“So that’s the correct method of pouring it. You have a way with such things.”

“It’s no big deal.”

Carol placed the full cup back on its saucer in front of Myalo.

Next, she poured a little of the blended tea into her own cup and tasted it to

see what aroma it had. While water dropwort tea carried a single flavor, this blended tea was a mixture of things, so she couldn't be sure quite what it was without smelling and tasting a little first.

She found that the blend focused on sweet flavors with minimal bitterness. A little air mixed in would bring out those gentle flavors, so this time she poured the liquid from a slight height to allow some bubbles to form.

Now that her own tea was served, she put the pot back down.

"Now, let's enjoy."

"Yes. I will indeed."

Myalo raised the cup to her lips and relaxed as she appreciated the taste.

"It's just as good as I thought," she said.

Carol had high expectations for her own tea too.

"You're right," she agreed. "This is good tea."

Secretly, she wasn't impressed with it at all. Some sokon mushrooms had been added to enhance the aroma, but its taste was so overpowering that it ruined whatever harmony might've been created with the rest of the ingredients otherwise. The tea that her own mother made was far better than this. Carol had assumed that a place calling itself a "teahouse" was certain to serve the finest tea, but she'd been let down.

Still, it was no surprise that this place was popular with the pretty girls from the Cultural Academy. The tea here was still far better than whatever the amateurs at the dorm made.

Myalo suddenly began a new topic of conversation. "So when do you suppose you'll graduate from the Cultural Academy, Your Highness?"

Oh, right. We're supposed to have a conversation while we're drinking.

Carol had been so distracted by the tea that she'd forgotten that this was a place where friends came to talk about lighthearted topics.

"Hmm... Probably in two years."

"Wow. I didn't expect you'd graduate quite so fast."

Carol would be turning nineteen then. There was nothing unusual about graduating from the Cultural Academy at that age, but she'd progressed quickly considering that she was attending both schools at once.

"Well, I'd half finished learning Ancient Shanish before I even started school, and I'm not trying to learn Kulatish like you."

Proficiency in Ancient Shanish was indispensable for anyone who planned to engage in intellectual debates with the ruling seven witch families, so it had been a core part of Carol's education since she'd been very young. The same was true of most Cultural Academy students who graduated by the age of six-or-seventeen. Such students had a major head start compared to the others.

"I know it's not as difficult as Ancient Shanish, but don't you have to study law and the like too?" Myalo asked.

"Yeah, but a lot of it's worth credits in the Knight Academy too. It's not like I actually need double the number of credits. The compulsory and basic lecture classes are pretty much identical for both schools."

"Ha ha... I see."

"That's why I'm finding the Knight Academy a lot harder. I can handle all those lectures, but combat skills are always tough."

"Yes, indeed. We're at a physical disadvantage after all. Knight Academy would be very easy if we had as much strength as Dolla."

"Heh heh. It sure would."

In Dolla's case, his combat skills compensated for his mediocre grades in lecture classes. His hard work and persistence ensured that his grades never fell *too* far below average, but the way he struggled to the point of tears at his desk each day made Carol wish she could help him. Carol had tried explaining subjects to him in simple terms, but he always got so nervous near her that he couldn't study at all.

"Honestly, I think you could've attended both schools too, Myalo. You could join the Cultural Academy now, in fact."

Carol genuinely thought Myalo was capable. There was nothing preventing

her from entering the Cultural Academy this late. Someone like her could accumulate credits rapidly despite her time being split between both schools. Carol suspected Myalo could still graduate before the age of twenty. Even during her time focusing on the Knight Academy, Myalo had gained such an incredible command of Ancient Shanish that Carol often went to her for help.

Myalo waved off the suggestion with both hands as if she couldn't even joke about the idea. "Definitely not. I've got my work cut out with the Knight Academy already."

"Really...? You'd be exempt from seventy—maybe even ninety—percent of the courses."

The Cultural Academy only had academic lecture courses, so nothing else was needed in order to graduate. There were some etiquette courses that came close to being practical classes, but Myalo had already mastered the skills she'd need for those anyway.

"I'm certainly confident that I can pass the lecture courses, but it would get in the way of my Kulatish studies."

"Is it really that hard?"

Myalo was always studying Kulatish. She'd mumble vocabulary to herself whenever she had a free moment. If someone as intelligent as Myalo was working that hard on it and *still* struggling, it had to be even harder to learn than Ancient Shanish.

Contemporary Shanish had been born in a time of great upheaval. Ancient Shanish was so overly complex that it fell out of common use, and then several grammatical structures from that were incorporated into the everyday version that commoners spoke so that it could be used as a written language. It was a fusion of sorts, although the only new elements that had been added to the language were those needed to express certain concepts. Most of Ancient Shanish had simply been abandoned.

Thus, it stood to reason that if a language was any more difficult than Ancient Shanish, it'd be far too complex for use in everyday speech.

"It's not so much that it's difficult; it's more that I'm not suited to it. I'm

always being left behind by the students who are better at it.”

“Huh?”

It was as if Myalo considered herself slow when it came to that particular field. Carol found it hard to believe.

“It’s like music—some people are naturally better at it than others. Someone born with talent improves quickly, while others can spend ten years practicing without ever seeing any real improvement.”

“Yeah, but...”

“It’s the same. I could hardly believe it myself, but I once saw a Cultural Academy student speak fluent Kulatish after just a year of lectures. That was when it really hit me that I just didn’t have any aptitude for the language.”

It was clear from Myalo’s increasingly gloomy tone that she meant what she said, but Carol still struggled to accept it.

If the language was suitable for everyday speech, then it couldn’t possibly have as many forms of expression to memorize as Ancient Shanish did. That meant the barrier to learning had to stem from the way the language was spoken.

“You’ve got me curious now. Can you say something in Kulatish for me?”

“Of course... But please remember that my Kulatish isn’t very good.”

“I don’t mind.”

Myalo paused for a few moments before fulfilling Carol’s request.

“▽ ♡ § ✈ ✖ 𐀀 " ~、 ▽ e\$。 § ✂ ⊙ ✂ ----x.”

It sounded like nothing Carol had ever heard in her life. She’d been tempted to learn a little for herself if it wasn’t too much work, but that aspiration crumbled into dust the second the words had left Myalo’s lips.

“Wh-What did you just say?”

“‘Even if one argues with one’s wife, one’s anger must not persist until nightfall.’ Apparently that’s one of their religious teachings.”

“Then that first word... That meant ‘wife’?”

“Yes, that was ‘▽ ♡.’”

Having heard Kulatish, Carol had no desire to learn to speak it for herself. Everything about it, down to the mouth movements, was different from their language.

“That must be hard work.”

“And yet those with a knack for it master it in no time.”

“Then why do you force yourself to learn it? Is it really that interesting?”

That was the strangest part from Carol’s point of view. There wasn’t any rule that said Myalo *had* to take that particular course.

Lately, there were jobs in public relations at the royal castle that required Kulatish speakers, so minor witch families with no other role to serve would often have their children learn it. Myalo would never work in the royal castle, however, because she was enrolled in the Knight Academy.

Unless it was of personal interest to her, there was no reason to keep struggling with such a hard subject.

“It’s the course that Yuri has the most interest in. That makes me interested in it too.”

Carol smiled with some sudden realization. “Ah, it’s like that.”

“No, it’s not like one of *those* stories that the Cultural Academy students read.”

Myalo was talking about the books that often used Yuri as the main character. Normally, she wouldn’t have been exposed to them since she never visited White Birch Dormitory, but she might’ve found an opportunity to read them at some point.

Carol was enrolled at the Cultural Academy, but took no interest in their books. Though she knew about the infamous culture room, she couldn’t read the books within—no one had ever invited her.

According to Carol’s little sister—a passionate fan of such stories—Myalo was almost always bound to appear whenever Yuri was the main character. Her role was usually to get in the way of his (sexually perverted) romance. She was a

villain who disrupted his relationships.

Since Myalo wasn't a Cultural Academy student, she wasn't bound by any of their rules. That meant she could get as close to Yuri as she pleased; no doubt some girls there thought that was a little unfair.

But it was also a unique situation—a scenario involving a girl who could get friendly with the male lead was so different from anything else in the history of their literature. Such stories felt very fresh to the readers.

“By the way...” Carol said.

“Yes?” Myalo asked as she popped a dumpling into her mouth.

“Why'd you decide to join the Knight Academy?”

“Ah...”

“You don't have to answer if it's personal,” Carol added quickly.

She'd been meaning to ask for some time, but she'd always hesitated in case it was something Myalo didn't want to talk about.

“No, it's fine. If you're interested, I don't mind telling you.”

Surprisingly, she was open to discussing it.

“I've got to admit, I've been dying to know. It's obviously not because you enjoy exercising so much...”

Myalo often trained intensely—just like she had today—but it wasn't because she enjoyed it. All that effort was for the sake of meeting obligations; she never did it for fun.

She couldn't have enrolled for Yuri either, since she hadn't even met him when she first entered the academy.

“It's definitely not something I'd tell just anyone, but I don't mind if it's you, Your Highness.”

“Don't worry, your secret's safe with me.”

“Before I get started, we'd better order another round of tea. It's a long story.”

I'll begin. But first, could I ask how much you know about my birth, Your Highness?

No, I don't mean it like that. I just wondered whether you knew about the Gudinveil family's circumstances already.

Ah, so you simply know my grandmother's name and a little about the businesses the family operates. I see. In that case, I'd better start from the very beginning.

My mother was the first child born to my grandmother. My father's parents were knights, although my father was never truly one himself. He did graduate and earn his knighthood, but I think it takes more than that to be called one.

Yes, you're quite right. In fact, he never held a title of any sort, so he was...more or less an ordinary individual.

My father has already passed away. Don't be sorry, Your Highness. I know your situation is the same as mine in that regard.

So...I should start by talking a little about my mother and father's time at the academy.

My father was at the Knight Academy, while—needless to say—my mother was studying at the Cultural Academy.

My father was born to the Gai family, which has served under the Bof chieftain family for many generations. The family's head held the title of lord-of-campaigns. I've never met anyone from my father's side because he cut ties with them.

No, no, please. I wouldn't feel comfortable meeting with them at this point anyway.

My father dated my mother while they were at the academy. It initially started when my mother fell in love with him at first sight.

She must've known he would've been reluctant to fraternize with the eldest daughter from one of the seven witch families, so she used a false name whenever they met. As a highborn lady of the Gudinveil family, my mother was,

of course, rather well known. I'm sure one of my father's friends could've chosen to reveal her true identity to him at some point, but my father hid his relationship from his friends. He must've worried about rumors spreading quickly if word of his relationship with a witch got out.

They continued to see each other for almost three years. There were numerous twists and turns along the way, but I'll have to skip over those.

Their graduation days were drawing near. It was then that my mother learned she was pregnant. You might say that this was when my father's problems began.

That was when he first learned that his girlfriend was an important daughter from one of the seven witch families. Up until that point, she'd misled him into believing she was the third-born daughter of some minor witch family. It must've been quite a shock for him.

If she really *had* been from a minor family, the matter could've easily been dealt with. He would simply take her as his wife. Unfortunately, she was the eldest daughter from a witch family whose head held the title lady-of-virtue, so things weren't that simple. Now that she was pregnant, he wouldn't just have to marry her—he would also have to take her name.

I don't know what sort of arguments happened between the two of them, but my father eventually ended up accepting his fate and agreed to become part of her family. In effect, he was agreeing to throw away almost all of his birthrights.

Needless to say, both sides of my family considered the situation scandalous. An eldest daughter—someone in line for the family headship—had gotten pregnant while still at school. It was considered outrageous.

I heard that my grandmother was furious, but since my mother's stomach had grown too large for her to hide, there was no choice but for my parents to wed.

As it turned out, she soon miscarried. Still, that wasn't sufficient reason for them to call off a wedding they'd already announced publicly. If news of my mother's pregnancy wasn't already widespread, they might've canceled the arrangement, but my mother herself had already made it well known.

My father spent the final days of his school life with a cloud hanging over him.

His own family had already disinherited him by that point, and he'd abandoned all of his friends.

Once he'd graduated, he married my mother and began living at the Gudineil manor. He'd never studied at the Cultural Academy, so he was incapable of any of the tasks performed there. He became aimless. Sometimes he attended social events, but he mostly spent his days idling about.

Then, fifteen years after their marriage, I was finally born. Yes, they went fifteen years without having any children.

As my father's first child, he always doted on me. The rest of the family must've worried what influence he'd have on me, because they hated to see him coddle me. But, despite their protests, they did nothing to keep him away from me. We always spent time together.

No, they didn't leave us alone out of compassion or anything of the sort. My mother had shown so little promise that the family had low expectations for me also.

Heh heh. Isn't that unusual?

My mother breastfed me, but my father raised me otherwise. He read me bedtime stories, played with me, and told me amusing tales about his time at the Knight Academy. He was also the one who taught me the basics of reading and writing.

When it became clear that I had real potential, my father couldn't always be near me. But even then, he would visit me in my room and spend time with me.

Yes, I loved my father.

Even after fifteen years, he never forgot what it meant to be a knight. He taught me about the values that a knight upholds while I was still very young.

Is that the reason I entered the Knight Academy? No, of course not. Back then, I still intended to enroll at the Cultural Academy.

Think about how knights love to go into the forests and hunt—it doesn't mean that they'll quit being knights to become hunters instead. It obviously *did* influence my eventual decision to ignore everyone's objections and enter the

Knight Academy, but I hadn't planned to do so in my early years.

The event that would lead me to enter the Knight Academy happened when I was eight years old. My father died while protecting my mother.

I was traveling to an evening event with my family that night. On the way, a group with a grudge against the Gudinveils attacked our carriages.

It wasn't such a rare occurrence—witches consider it a taboo to kill one another, but when someone loses everything due to political strife or a trade war, they're left with nothing but their shame. At that point, taboos cease to matter.

Needless to say, countless people bear grudges against the major witch families.

A smaller witch family that had been deceived by my grandmother at the royal castle had joined forces with a merchant who'd been left penniless following the collapse of his business. They gathered up people and attacked us.

We'd headed to the event in separate carriages. I happened to be riding in a carriage with my grandmother some way behind the carriage that my parents were in. They were the ones that were attacked.

The bandits took out two of their guards with a surprise attack before they killed the coach driver and attacked the carriage. My father went out alone with his sword and tried to guard the door of his carriage.

He fought bravely and managed to kill five or so bandits himself. They weren't trained assassins, just common thugs. Unfortunately, he was outnumbered. There were a dozen of them, so he couldn't hold them back alone.

Our carriage hurried toward them so that our guards could help. By the time the bandits had been defeated, it was too late to save him.

My father's clothing had been torn to shreds, and his body was covered in wounds. He was slumped against the wagon door, unable to stand up.

My father was taken straight to a doctor. His wounds were sewn up, but he'd lost so much blood that his face was deathly pale. The doctor told us it was too late. My mother had to be carried to the manor after fainting in the carriage,

and my grandmother was busy dealing with the aftermath, so I was the only person by my father's side during his final moments.

He spoke to me while on the verge of death.

"I wanted to die like a knight..." he said.

He said nothing about wanting to protect my mother.

"I didn't do it to protect her," he added. "I just wanted to feel like I'd protected *someone* before I died, like a knight would... But who's going to say I died an honorable death protecting someone like *her*?"

Since then, I've come to realize that my father had long since fallen out of love with my mother.

"That's a regret... But this isn't so bad," he said before stroking my hair. Finally, he passed away.

Did I really find it that moving? What? Oh, no, you've misunderstood.

My father's words will, of course, always stay with me, but that wasn't the catalyst for my decision. I was still fully set on being a witch at that point, since I still hadn't realized that they do awful things.

I grew up believing that witches were revered for the important work they performed. It was what everyone told me.

My father's words simply made me realize that there was more than one way to live. His didn't seem so bad, but he'd never said anything to discourage me from being a witch. No one wants to give their child a bad impression of their occupation, and he was indirectly involved in it himself. Actually, he was probably more worried that he'd make life difficult for me if he told me the truth.

As I'm sure you can guess, I was given such a sheltered upbringing by the Gudinveils that I wasn't even aware there were people who hated witches. Even the lowest scoundrel doesn't tell their child, "I do all kinds of awful things to get by."

So I never once doubted that I would be a Gudinveil witch, and I hoped I'd someday be head of family. But something happened soon after that made me

open my eyes.

I was unbearably sad after my father's death. The circumstances around it were just too much for me to take. For a while, I couldn't even study, and I cried every day until I made myself ill. I think I must've been bedridden for about three months.

At first, my mother and grandmother visited my room regularly to encourage me. After two months, though, they kept telling me to snap out of it.

Other than me, the whole family was indifferent toward my father's death. They must've worried that this otherwise inconsequential event might render me useless.

I understand how they felt. My mother had been passionately in love when she'd first married, but it had become a loveless union by the time I was born. To my grandmother, he must've been a nuisance from the very start. My father was unwanted by everyone except me, so it was no wonder they all told me to pick myself up and stop getting upset over nothing.

And then... Actually, before I go on... There's no one listening to us here, is there?

No, everything up to now is common knowledge in the witches' world, so I don't care whether anyone heard all that.

Now, where was I?

One day, my mother came to my room where she found me crying, just like I did every day.

"You weren't even his child," she told me.

Heh, you're shocked? It was a shock for me too, at first. I think my heart came to a stop for a full ten seconds.

Oh? Yes, of course, I asked who my real father was.

I was too distressed to remember her words exactly, but her reply was something like, "I slept with multiple men until I got pregnant." She was frank about it.

I was so stunned that I couldn't even respond.

There's no way I can be sure now, but I suspect my father had some problem that prevented him from getting a woman pregnant.

Yes, some people have problems like that.

No, it wasn't something caused by an injury to an important organ. I think he was just born like that. I once brought up the topic with Yuri in passing, and he told me he'd heard of similar situations before.

Yes, that's right. Some men produce semen that isn't capable of making a woman pregnant.

Yes, that's exactly right. It's likely that she slept with another man at the Cultural Academy so that she could get pregnant and force my father to marry her... Or perhaps it was just a commonplace affair.

I looked into it later and learned that my mother wasn't my father's first either—he'd been with many other women. Through the course of their fifteen-year relationship, my father's affairs had caused them to have serious arguments several times.

According to rumors I heard later, he had numerous encounters with the manor's servants and women he'd met in taverns, yet he'd never produced a single offspring. Given his countless encounters with different women over the course of ten or more years, he should've produced an illegitimate child or two. That's why I'm sure he wasn't capable of it.

I'm sure my mother became impatient after ten years of sexual activity that couldn't make her pregnant.

At any rate, when I learned that this was how I came to be born, it made me feel unwell.

Yes, indeed. I've come to terms with it all now, but my reaction was different back then.

I was beyond simply feeling upset. I couldn't keep food down at all. I vomited whenever I ate, and my stomach was upset at all times of day.

My heart was full of feelings that were ready to burst out. I smashed plates when my emotions got the better of me.

Heh, it's funny to imagine, isn't it?

That's right. All I did was break plates. That's all I could do. I was too weak to lift anything heavier than a spoon by that point. I was a pampered little eight-year-old.

Since I was constantly bedridden, consumed by my rage, I would do my best to tear apart the sheets, but I never managed to do more than tear off a few fibers. Even the thinnest of sheets were too tough for me to rip apart.

The family furniture couldn't be broken by my fists, since they were all sturdy pieces of the finest quality. Striking them with all my might simply left me rolling on the floor in pain.

Heh... That used to leave me angry beyond words.

So I was a destructive little girl, but all I could do was throw plates around. Oh, and one time I suddenly knocked over a candlestand while the candle was still burning, but it only caused a minor fuss.

After a lot of fretting and lashing out by myself, I went to see my grandmother.

Yes, she was in charge of the household and head of the Gudinveil family.

The reason I hadn't been to see my grandmother earlier was because my mother had told me about her own misdeeds in confidence, and I worried that she might be punished if they came to light.

At that point, I still saw my grandmother as a fair ruler. My childish sense of justice battled against my love for my family, and finally I decided to let my grandmother cast judgment on my mother. I went to tell on her.

Yes.

After listening closely to what I had to say, my grandmother asked, "Yes, and what about it?" She added, "It's not worth worrying about. It doesn't matter what seed produced you."

No, I don't think it was awful of her at all. It sounded as though she'd said it to reassure me, and I more or less agreed. I wasn't thinking about who my biological father was—I'd already decided that my late father was the real one.

But what I really couldn't accept was the way he'd been betrayed.

That's right. I know they were both guilty of cheating on each other, though I wasn't aware of it at the time. But it wasn't the cheating itself that bothered me—it was that she'd made my father raise another man's child.

He'd raised me with love, but he'd done so believing he was doting on his own child. My mother not only betrayed him, but—with her lies—she also sullied the pure love and devotion he'd shown me. It was such a despicable thing that I couldn't help but feel sick.

I expressed my honest feelings to my grandmother, but she didn't seem to understand me.

She essentially thought that, since my father had died without ever learning the truth, there was no problem for us to deal with. She was certainly right about that, but as a naive child with no knowledge of the world outside, I thought she was missing the point. I'd always considered my grandmother a good-natured woman.

That's right. I knew nothing of the world.

Thinking back now, I think the reason I began feeling disgust toward my grandmother was because my father had taught me to think like a knight. If it hadn't been for his influence, I would've accepted everything my grandmother told me.

I've been talking for some time, haven't I? But I'm almost finished.

Maybe you could say it opened my eyes. I grew suspicious of my family's business and began to look at it very differently. Two years later, by the time I was ten, I hadn't the slightest inclination to take over the business myself. I'd decided that I'd enter the Knight Academy instead, and live the way my father had always wanted to.

When it came time to prepare for my enrollment at the academy, I planned for it carefully. I snuck into my mother and grandmother's study to falsify the documents stored there.

Hm?

Oh, yes. It sounds awful, doesn't it? But that's exactly what I did.

I don't mean to boast, but I was treated as though I was the Gudinveil family's rising star. Its future rested on my shoulders. The fact that no one was going to let me attend the Knight Academy was as clear as day, so I had to fool my entire family in order to do it. To this day, they don't approve of me attending the Knight Academy.

I prepared the necessary paperwork myself and secretly switched it with the Cultural Academy paperwork. I checked the manor's mail every day. Sure enough, I found the letters asking whether there'd been some mistake, and I burned them all.

Looking back, I think I was very fortunate that the Cultural Academy's director was a Marmoset—they don't get on well with the Gudinveils. If it had been someone from a family we've always been on good terms with, such as the Charleville family, they would've sent a messenger to speak to my grandmother directly, and all my plans would've been ruined.

Yes, our families are enemies. It wasn't always like that... Well, it has been for a long time, but not long enough to call it a historical feud or anything like that. The dispute started when my grandmother and the current head of the Marmoset family were both still young. But I digress...

When I went to take the Cultural Academy exam, I merely entered the building and hid. When the exam was over, I went home in the carriage that had come to pick me up, as if nothing was amiss.

When the Knight Academy exam happened the next day, I had to sneak out of my home to be there. I did well for a ten-year-old.

My grandmother was completely unaware up until the day of the admission ceremony.

Heh heh. You were awfully cross with Yuri when the ceremony was over, Your Highness. You dragged him away somewhere while he was talking to me.

At that point, I was worried that someone from the manor would catch and imprison me. I'm sure there was a great furor in the household when I disappeared.

Yes. There was a very good chance that they would've captured me and used their authority to have me transferred to the Cultural Academy. It would've been difficult since the academic year had already started, but as long as I hadn't entered the dormitory, it was still well within their power.

Heh heh... It brings back memories, doesn't it?

On the day of the admission ceremony, I disguised myself before entering the Knight Academy. Yes, much like you've done today, Your Highness. I'd secretly procured a Knight Academy uniform myself and hidden it near the royal castle when I'd been there on a separate occasion.

Yes, I still remember where. It was the fifth closet on the first floor, in a room that was seldom used. It held some cleaning equipment. Heh heh. I did my research well for a child.

I changed in there, then—once the ceremony was over—I snuck out of the castle wearing a coat to disguise myself and walked to the Knight Academy alone. That was the most nerve-racking part.

If I'd boarded a carriage wearing the Cultural Academy uniform I'd been given, I would've had all sorts of problems.

If only Yuri had accepted my invitation to lunch that day, I wouldn't have been in such danger.

Yes, I did. But he declined.

That's right. He was going to have lunch with Lord Rook.

A group couldn't have barged in to abduct me while I was dining with a lord-supreme, so staying close to Yuri until we'd reached the Knight Academy would've been my safest option.

Fortunately, I'd been disguised well enough to make it to the Knight Academy alone. I was able to enter the dormitory safely.

It was on that same day that Yuri caused a great scene by fighting with Dolla.

Ah hah. Come to think, I never saw Yuri as dispirited as he was back then.

Oh? Yes, he did.

Ah, yes, you were staying at White Birch Dormitory back then, rather than with us.

Getting into a bloody fight on his first day in the dormitory had really upset Yuri. He was like a different person. When we spoke, he said that he thought he was going to be expelled from the academy for getting into a fight on his first day.

Of course, there was never any chance that a son of the Ho family would have his future prospects ruined over something so trivial.

If he'd killed Dolla that day, he would've been considered mad, rather than criminal, for beating his roommate to death on their first meeting. That's the only way he could've been expelled over it.

When I told him that he didn't need to worry as long as his roommate wasn't dead, my words seemed to put Yuri's mind at rest.

I had worries of my own, since it was my first day in the dormitory, but Yuri's incident helped to distract me.

After I'd made it there safely, I didn't return home for another ten months or so.

Heh heh, there are things that even I can't bring myself to do.

I knew I'd be in for a lengthy lecture if I ever went back, but people have a way of cooling off as time passes. Well, that's often the case, at least, but... In my case, I'm never going to get a warm welcome upon my return, no matter how much time I give everyone to cool off.

Even now, I don't go near my home unless absolutely necessary.



Carol remained quiet for a while after Myalo had finished speaking.

Although Myalo sounded carefree, she'd just described many hardships. Carol couldn't imagine how many tears Myalo had shed over her losses—both her father's death and whatever faith she'd had in her mother.

Eventually, Carol spoke. "Okay... I understand now."

“You do?”

“Thank you for telling me.”

Carol took Myalo’s hand. The skin on their hands was harder than most girls’.

“It’s nothing. It’s all in the past. I’m happy now,” Myalo said.

“You’re sure?”

“I won’t have any more troubles until I need to find employment. That may be very difficult for me, depending on how things go.”

She still sounded carefree.

She’s so strong, Carol thought.

No doubt that recounting her story had dredged up at least *some* of the sadness she’d felt back then, yet she was smiling. Without a steadfast heart, that wouldn’t have been possible.

“Hah. If you have trouble, you’ve got me and Yuri. Talk to one of us. I’m sure we’ll work something out.”

“That’s true... Oh, the tea’s gotten cold. Perhaps it’s time we left.”

“Guess so. We talked a lot.”

“Yes, we’ve been here for quite some time.”

“Let me take care of the bill. Consider it thanks for telling me so much.”

After Carol had paid, the two left.

Once they were back at the academy, Carol removed her disguise and they both went back to their ordinary routines.

Chapter 3 — The Observation Unit

I

My seventeenth spring in this cold kingdom had arrived, but the harshness of winter wasn't completely behind us.

I would turn eighteen before long.

I watched as wooden boxes were unloaded, one after the other, from a splendid sailing ship bigger than any other in the royal capital's port.

The ship had three masts. There were four square sails on the foremost two masts, and one large fore-and-aft-rigged sail on the rear mast. Since the ship was moored close to shore, all of the sails were folded up.

The wooden boxes being unloaded were filled with cotton.

Raw cotton could be used for making padded jackets or bedding. It was a hugely popular product in the royal capital as of late, and it was definitely a seller's market.

Cotton plants could be cultivated en masse on plantations in the south. The material itself was nothing more than white fibers plucked from the plant's flower, so it could be bought dirt cheap. Once it was transported here, it could then be sold for over ten times its original price.

Our process was simple—we bought a product and then sold it again for a higher price somewhere else. Still, the profits we made were staggering. The sheer amount of money that came in with the return of each ship made the idea of hard work look ridiculous.

The celestial navigation equipment was maintained in Suomi and never taken into the royal capital, so no matter how much money we made, no one could copy our business model. We'd probably be able to keep this going until we created an oversupply of cotton that crashed the market.

The ship that was being unloaded was the second one that had been built for

us in the Albio Republic. The first was there waiting behind it, ready to be unloaded next. A third ship was currently under construction in Albio.

Harol had begun trading for us there just over a year ago. We'd initially gambled the life of the company on it, but we'd been able to grow rapidly to this scale soon after Harol's first return.

The goods being unloaded at the port were piling up along the wharf. Employees under Caph's command confirmed that the boxes bore the labels they'd been given in Suomi, then passed them over to merchants who were waiting on the wharf with their own carriages.

I was sitting on a pier some distance away, watching my employees at work and getting lost in my own thoughts. Longshoremen often gathered here when they had nothing to do, but they were all busy dealing with my ships at that moment.

"Yuri Ho, right?" a voice behind me asked, sending a shiver down my spine.

I immediately rolled sideways, drew my dagger, and glanced at my surroundings to ascertain my situation.

I wasn't surrounded. An ordinary-looking woman dressed like a commoner stood in front of me. Her long hair was tied back in a ponytail.

Although my response had probably looked like an overreaction, alarm bells were ringing in my head.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

I hadn't heard her approach. The sound of the waves might've drowned out some of her footsteps, but not when she was so close behind me.

She looked entirely at ease. She wasn't holding a weapon, and she didn't look any different from an everyday commoner. But that just made me more suspicious.

"What's got you spooked?" she asked.

"I didn't hear your footsteps."

"Ah." The explanation seemed to have satisfied her.

“What are you?” I asked.

“I’ve come to summon you to the royal castle.”

Huh?

“You’re a messenger from the royal family?”

“You could say that.”

“Why not just ask Princess Carol to pass on the message? That’s what normally happens. What’s different this time?”

I wouldn’t just go along with anything she told me. I’d be a fool to follow her and risk being abducted. I wanted to hear a good reason as to why Carol hadn’t brought the message, since she was always the one when it came to patent-related matters.

What really bothered me, though, was this woman’s silent footsteps.

“I’m under direct orders from Her Majesty the Queen. Come with me.”

“Answer my questions,” I insisted.

“Haven’t you realized? I’m a royal sword.”

The royal swords were an all-woman organization that formed part of the first order of the royal guard, although it was really only just on paper. Rather than being an ordinary unit that took orders from a command structure with the queen at the top, the royal swords took orders from the queen directly, and they trained any new members themselves. Their role was to guard royal family members, but they also worked alongside the intelligence agencies. They could even be described as a band of assassins.

In short, the royal swords were weapons under the queen’s control.

If, for example, a chieftain family turned rebellious, the royal swords would work behind the scenes. They’d often kill the head of family before their rebellion could develop into a civil war. The royal family needed a group like this in order to maintain internal order since the family lacked a significant armed force of its own.

Since I was from a chieftain family myself, I felt I’d been confronted by my

natural enemy.

“A royal sword? All right. I guess something came up, and we’re keeping Carol out of it?”

That was the only explanation I could think of for why they’d send an assassin to come collect me.

“How dare you speak of Her Highness with so little respect?”

The woman’s face immediately became threatening. Clearly, she was deeply devoted to the royal family. Her Majesty might’ve appeared carefree, but her human blade was sharp and unyielding.

“Let’s see your sword first,” I demanded.

The name of their group came from the fact that these women carried blades given to them by the queen herself.

The woman produced a black scabbard from an inner pocket, then partially unsheathed her dagger without making a sound. It was a single-edged blade that glinted mysteriously on the sharpened side, while its rear was as black as soot.

It was consistent with the descriptions of weapons used by royal swords that I’d heard before. Steel that had been sharpened and polished to a mirror finish would stand out at night because of its reflectiveness. A black blade suggested that the wielder tended to operate under cover of darkness.

“Looks like the real thing. All right, I’ll go with you.”

I’d been holding my own weapon the whole time, but now I returned it to its sheath.

The woman wordlessly turned her back to me and began walking.

I’d crept by guards like her several times before when I’d gone out with Carol, so she probably had me categorized as someone to watch closely.

I quietly followed behind her. Then, once I got close, I aimed a swift kick at the back of her knee.

Those who fought with daggers or hand-to-hand combat were often taught a

useful combination of moves. First, you had to kick the opponent's rear knee from behind to upset their stance, then immediately grab their collar or armor, pull them backward, and finally place a blade to their throat or punch them. It was hard to pull off because you had to be right behind the opponent, but it could prove highly useful in the chaos of the battlefield.

I'd been made to practice it over and over, so I had the movements down perfectly. The moment I swung my foot toward her, however, she quickly moved her legs to dodge the kick while simultaneously swatting away the hand that tried to grab her collar. She ended up throwing me off-balance, then turned to face me.

"What are you trying to do?" she asked in a voice as cold as her stare.

"Just testing you."

"Testing a royal sword? You must have a death wish."

"A street thug wouldn't have dodged, but a royal sword would have," I replied casually. "And now, if you really *were* sent here by Her Majesty, you're not going to attack me."

She gave me the same frigid stare.

"I'm just making sure. Don't get mad."

"Let me warn you, my order was simply to make sure you arrive in one piece."

"That sounds scary. Why didn't you abduct me while I was sleeping, then?"

If what she said was true, we should've been in an intense fight already, not standing around having a friendly chat.

"Hmph..."

She either didn't have a counterargument or couldn't be bothered to think of one, because she just turned her back and began walking again.

The truth was, I'd wanted to see a royal sword's skills for myself. Now I knew that she was every bit as capable as I would've expected from an elite soldier—uh, an elite assassin.

She was probably between twenty and twenty-five years old. There was no

way Carol would reach this level of skill in five years, so this woman's strength had either been the result of a grueling training regimen, or she'd been born with exceptional talent. Either way, I was impressed.

So there are some exceptionally strong women out there too.



We entered the royal castle through some sort of back entrance. The royal sword led me through a deserted corridor before opening the door to a room.

The room was like a small parlor, with thin curtains covering the delicate, closed windows. The furnishings were impressive, but it felt empty because no one else was there.

"Sit," she instructed.

I sat on the chair she'd pointed to. It was like a one-person sofa, and very soft. There was another one across from me, and a square, knee-high table placed between them. A tea set was already in place.

The royal sword remained standing by the door, her back to the wall. She hadn't taken the seat opposite me.

After I'd waited a short while, yawning occasionally, the door opened once more. Her Majesty entered unaccompanied. For some reason, she was carrying a steaming kettle.

I rose from my chair and gave her a standing bow. "It pleases me to see you well, Your Majesty."

"I'm sorry for dragging you here," she said with a warm smile.

I didn't sense any anger toward me.

"It's no trouble at all. I was unoccupied anyway."

"I'm relieved to hear it. Have a seat."

Her Majesty sat in the seat opposite as I returned to my own.

Something serious must've happened if she'd felt the need to dispatch a royal sword. I decided to try probing her for information.

"I'm not sure why I was brought here, but I assume it was more than an

invitation to drink tea.”

“No, it’s not just that.”

I was right about that much.

“Then might I ask why?”

“Allow me to pour our tea first.”

Okay, tea first. That must be what the kettle’s for.

“Have you read many classics, Yuri?”

Why’s she bringing that up?

“I don’t have much interest in them. My Ancient Shanish is poor.”

Since publishing was so primitive, translations only existed for the most famous of classic texts. Anyone wanting to study the classics would have to learn Ancient Shanish first. For that reason, I didn’t know much about them.

“Long ago, it was customary for women like me to entertain guests by pouring fine tea for them. There are various techniques and rules of etiquette to go with the practice.”

Wow, okay.

“I had no idea.”

We still had customs that formed the standard for table manners, but Her Majesty seemed to be talking about something else entirely—it sounded like a Japanese tea ceremony.

“All highborn women were taught to do this as part of their basic education.”

“I see. It’s hard to imagine it happening now.”

These days, everyone had maids that handled the tea preparation. Places like White Birch Dormitory didn’t have specialized maids for that purpose, so students there had no choice but to make it.

Still, I’d never heard of highborn women pouring their own tea at home except here within the royal family. Satsuki, for example, was incredibly fond of literature written in those long-gone times, but she always left it to the maids in

the Kalakumo manor to make her tea. I'd never seen her make a cup herself.

"When entertaining guests in the past, this was a way to express appreciation to knights for their service. The practice died out along with the empire. A similar practice was developed among commoners around the same time, though I'm not sure whether it's actually inspired by this one."

Thinking back, I remembered that Suzuya would always have a pot of tea ready for Rook when he returned from work. I'd always thought it was just something she liked to do, but it was possible that there had been a cultural significance to it.

"My mother taught the practice to me," Her Majesty continued, "but it hasn't been passed down in other families. I haven't heard of other royal families doing this either."

Her Majesty set about using the tea set. It was silent in her skillful hands.

"In the days of the empire, there was a sort of trust between men and women, between witches and knights. I believe that's what made the empire so strong... But just look at our situation now."

Long ago, the Shantila Empire was a single nation that united all of the Shanti people. The empire had lasted for one thousand four hundred years, but it had collapsed around nine hundred years ago.

I doubted Her Majesty had invited me here to discuss history, however, so I couldn't see why she'd brought it up. I went along with the conversation anyway.

"Yes, because the empire was defeated. It broke apart after losing the war against the Khanjar Khanate. Knights haven't been as highly revered by witches or royalty ever since," I replied.

The imperial army had been incredibly powerful by the standards of the time.

Back then, there'd been a large state known as the Xurxes Holy Empire, which had consisted of the adherents of Yeesusism. Still, their expeditionary forces had been repelled effortlessly by the Shantila Empire many times.

The Shantila Empire certainly had the territorial advantage when the battles

took place in cold northern regions, but the resistance they'd shown was no less impressive. In the end, however, the empire was defeated by a hero named Khanjar from an equestrian tribe.

Khanjar had long dreamed of bringing down the empire. This lifelong ambition of his grew as he repeatedly failed to seize territory from the empire in his youth.

He amassed territory that extended into the Middle East, East Asia, and—according to some stories, at least—even China. Then, to complete his life's work, he gathered up forces from across the entire area and threw them at the empire.

His forces were estimated to be at least 250,000. For two years he let his people starve as he collected provisions and marched his forces thousands of kilometers so that they could assemble in one place. This was the final army raised by the greatest military genius in all of history. The force was no mere band of naked slaves with spears forced into their hands; every soldier was trained and fully armored. The army of 250,000 included 100,000 knights who'd been hardened through service in numerous prior battles.

A major battle was fought in a place known as Minari, where the empire had also gathered up 110,000 soldiers. It was said that the empire's forces fought bravely, but they couldn't stand against Khanjar's forces. Eventually, they were routed.

Khanjar—perhaps satisfied now that his greatest wish had been fulfilled—died soon after the battle was won, leading to an internal conflict over who his successor would be.

But then a third party—crusaders—entered the fray. The empire's forces had been destroyed in the battle against Khanjar, and what was left couldn't resist the crusaders. The entire fertile southern region of the empire, including the Imperial Capital of Shantinion, was lost.

Because I knew the circumstances, I didn't think badly of the empire's knights. In my opinion, they'd merely met their match and been unlucky that so many bad people had targeted them.

The empress and witches of the time didn't see it that way, however. Both

decided to lay blame for the state's collapse upon the knights. That is, they said that the collapse of the state was entirely a consequence of the knights' weakness. The men, who were lambasted and spat upon, ceased to be the same proud individuals who'd risked their lives to protect their empress and their homeland.

In fact, such thinking still prevailed to this day and was even taught in the Cultural Academy's history classes.

Some of the knights used the chaos that followed to claim territory through violent means. They later came to call themselves chieftains as they were incorporated into a new system under a queen's rulership.

Then, as queens and witches sought to put more power in the hands of women, unusual armed forces led by women were created. One key reason for their conception was, as Her Majesty had just said, the breakdown of trust that had occurred. The imperial family of old used to have an imperial guard that had been structured similarly to the royal swords and the first order, but that had been made up of men who'd sworn an oath of loyalty to the Shantilan empress.

"I see you're quite knowledgeable already."

"I know a little," I replied.

I'd have to be completely brain-dead to spend eight years at the Knight Academy without learning any of this. Most of us didn't have a deep understanding of these events, but the gist of things was common knowledge.

Her Majesty poured water from a height into a beautifully colored teapot. I heard a glugging sound as hot water filled the teapot and mixed with air.

"Is this somehow related to whatever I'm here to discuss?"

Don't tell me she's planning to ask me whether I'll marry Carol?

"Be patient. It's customary to enjoy some light chat until the tea has been poured."

Light chat...?

The topic we'd gotten onto was too serious for this to be called light

conversation. From the moment I'd been invited here, I'd gotten the sense that Her Majesty wasn't in the same easygoing mood as the day that I'd come to see her with Carol. Besides, the thin curtains around us were all closed, giving the darkened room a heavy atmosphere. This was no place for laughter over lighthearted stories.

"I'm sorry. My manners are lacking due to my upbringing in the countryside."

"No need to apologize. I just thought you might enjoy talking about history, but perhaps I'm boring you."

"No, not at all."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm just a little anxious about what we might discuss next. It makes it difficult to focus on the topic at hand."

Her Majesty chuckled; she sounded just like Carol.

"When I pour the tea myself, it's a sign that you're a welcome guest. It wouldn't be appropriate unless I was about to express gratitude or ask a favor. I certainly wouldn't do this if I'd summoned you here to chastise you."

"Knowing that helps me relax somewhat. I'll take the opportunity to enjoy the tea," I said, though I'd really felt like asking, "Why'd you send a royal sword after me then?"

She held great power over witches because their offices were granted to them by the royal family, so royal swords were usually the ones dispatched to deal with chieftain families. I couldn't help but be on my guard from the start.

It was as though the royal swords were the only ones Her Majesty could trust to handle matters quietly. Despite being our queen, it was quite possible that she had very few people she could confide in. That would be one explanation for why a royal sword had been her second choice of messenger after Carol.

Her Majesty picked up the teapot and then poured the drink into a teacup.

"For you," she said.

"I'm honored. Thank you."

I reached for the teacup on the saucer, gripped the handle, and raised it to my mouth. The aroma carried a slight bitterness together with a complex collection of floral scents.

After I'd drank it, I was left with an aftertaste similar to honey. It was a blended tea unlike anything I'd ever tasted. I couldn't be sure whether it was thanks to the ingredients themselves, or the way the tea had been prepared, but it was exquisite either way.

"This is very fine tea. It's helping me relax."

"You flatter me, but I'm glad to hear it regardless."

"It's no mere flattery." I'd genuinely meant it.

"Please, enjoy another cup," Her Majesty said as she lifted the teapot again.

"O-Oh... Thank you."

I brought my cup forward like a wine glass to be topped up, and she filled it.

"I've prepared some confectioneries too. Please help yourself."

She offered me a small plate that was filled with baked snacks.

"Thank you," I said while taking one of them.

I wasn't particularly hungry, but they tasted so good that I ended up eating the whole plateful.



Once the plate was empty and my stomach was full, Her Majesty finally said, "Now perhaps you'd like to know why I brought you here."

"Indeed."

So what's it gonna be?

I was feeling very laid back about the reason by this point because of the soothing effect of the hot tea and snacks.

"The truth is, war is about to break out in the neighboring kingdom."

Huh...?

"I see..."

“Oh... You’re not surprised?”

No, but I was when I first heard.

“Is this a recent piece of news?” I asked.

“Yes. Just four days ago a messenger brought word from Kilhina.”

I held back a sigh of amazement. If it hadn’t been for the offering of tea, I might’ve actually sighed out loud.

“I first learned of it in July of last year,” I told her.

It was April of the imperial year 2318. The news had reached me in July of the year before. It was possible I’d misremembered the date, but I’d definitely known for more than a few months, at least.

“You did?”

“I presented my Aunt Satsuki with a report detailing all this, and I believe reports were then sent to you...”

I’m definitely not going to act shocked over news that I had, and shared with you, ten months ago.

“I never received it. What could have happened?”

She knitted her brow.

The witches must’ve stopped the reports from reaching her. I knew just how much they prioritized their own survival above all else, but it was shocking that they’d ignore concerns about the kingdom’s future.

“The enemy abandoned their attempts at invasion roughly ten years ago when the emperor of the Tyrelme Holy Empire was killed by my own uncle,” I explained. “They ceased their attacks on Kilhina after a civil war to decide his successor broke out. That’s my understanding.”

“Yes, I know this. I heard it from an exile.”

There’d be something wrong if she hadn’t known about this. Her information matched mine, but I’d known about Tyrelme’s internal conflict for a long time now—I’d heard about it from Ms. Ether.

Ms. Ether had used the chaos to pass through the Tyrelme Holy Empire and

seek asylum here. It was old news in the other parts of the world, so other exiles were certain to have given similar reports when questioned.

The former emperor of the Tyrelme Holy Empire had been fifty years old at the time. It was said that he'd been admired and trusted by those who served under him and lauded as a genius by the civilian population.

Crusaders operated under the noble pretense of eradicating demons, but their real intention was to pillage and colonize. The whole thing was like a lucrative side project for the nation. Though some soldiers were willing to risk their lives for a chance to get rich quick, commissioned officers were less likely to throw their lives away in such a war.

Likewise, the former emperor hadn't intended to give his life for the cause. He was said to have been in robust health and free from sickness despite his aged appearance. He'd surely never seen his death coming.

The emperor's death via Gok's suicide attack was an unforeseeable tragedy from the enemy's point of view. He'd had no time to prepare a will or to consider his last words. As such, a fierce battle for succession broke out among those who survived him.

Tyrelme was at the front line, so any strife in that nation made it difficult for other armies to march onto the peninsula too.

Since conquest wasn't a particularly high priority for would-be crusaders, they simply took a break and held off their invasion for ten years.

"But a successor was finally decided in June of last year," I said. "The victor was the former emperor's third son, Alfred. The problem is that Alfred got himself into a lot of debt by bribing the prince-electors during the succession process."

"Debt...? I'm not sure what you mean."

I'd have to explain this to her in more detail.

"Put simply, he's indebted to the influential nobles who supported his bid for the throne. He entered into a contract of sorts that promised paying his supporters after becoming emperor, which gained him more support. To use our kingdom as an example, suppose Your Majesty were to pass away, and then

Princess Carla were to promise money to any witches or chieftains who recognized her over Princess Carol. She might become queen, but then she'd be obligated to pay her supporters a lot of money."

"Ah, I see."

It was a disrespectful choice of example, but it got the point across.

"But would that really secure his position?" she asked.

I'd wondered the same thing myself. Rumors claimed that the emperor now owed a staggering sum, and that the imperial territory served as collateral.

The Tyrelme Holy Empire was similar to the Shiyalta Kingdom in that the houses serving under the imperial family were collectively more powerful than the imperial family itself. As the imperial family fought to hold onto their position at the top, the other houses would look for ways to claim more power for themselves. In other words, Alfred had to make huge concessions to those houses in order to become emperor, chipping away at the foundations laid by successive generations of monarchs before him.

"I don't think he's secure at all, but I'm sure he would've done anything to become emperor. The battle for authority was so intense that it's likely his only other alternative was to face execution. If that were the case, the risk would be worth it to him."

Outside of stories, one's dignity was never worth more than one's life. In the real world, people would do anything to survive. If his life depended on him winning the power struggle, he couldn't afford to worry about appearances.

"Really? I suppose you're right."

"As a result, Alfred's first act as emperor was to reach out to the Catholica Papal State to discuss a new crusade. A successful invasion of Kilhina could prove highly profitable for him."

"I understand that. He needs money quickly."

"Indeed. If he fails to raise revenue through the invasion, he'll be forced to impose heavy taxes. Raising taxes soon after taking the throne would turn much of his own populace against him."

“Yes, that’s a last resort, I’m sure.”

Her Majesty nodded, perhaps remembering how things were for her when she initially assumed the throne.

“His coronation ceremony took place in July of last year. Soon after, he issued requests to multiple nations, asking them to raise crusade forces. These forces were amassed at different times depending on the location, but each started to gather in February or March of this year. It’s now April, so the Kilhina Kingdom will no doubt be anticipating some activity from the crusaders who assembled first.”

“Where did you learn all of this, Yuri?”

“It’s difficult to assemble a large army without recruiting soldiers from across an entire nation. It’s not something that can be done quietly. My company trades with nations across the sea. The first thing the sailors do when arriving there is to enter a tavern and begin drinking. The trading staff also arrange to have dinner with local merchants. Everyone ends up having conversations that inevitably turn to recent events. Information like what I’ve just given you is easily gathered without so much as a single bribe.”

Calling it an intelligence-gathering mission sounded like an exaggeration, but our company was making an effort to learn what it could. We weren’t training specialist spies to steal classified documents from government offices or anything, but we didn’t have to—news of recent happenings were openly discussed already.

A nation’s leader couldn’t plan a surprise attack in their head, assemble an army in secret, and then strike without warning. War didn’t work that way. It just wasn’t possible to amass a large crusade force from various different countries without being noticed, and so no effort had ever been made to hide the process.

For a merchant doing business overseas, such knowledge was essential. A war would involve moving vast supplies, causing wild fluctuations in the cost of goods in different areas.

“Ah, I see.”

“All of this information should’ve been included in the reports my father presented to you.”

Since I was part of the Ho family, that was the only place I reported all the information I’d gathered to. I knew we could profit from our monopoly over the information, and certain pieces of information could be held back if reporting them to the royal family would harm us.

Everything we’d discussed was common knowledge among my family members, but these matters weren’t made public for fear of stirring civil unrest.

In any case, I’d heard that Rook had reported everything directly to the royal family—he hadn’t withheld any information. We had no reason to hide news about the war, and these particular reports would put us in Her Majesty’s favor, so I was sure Rook had been open with her.

“There must have been some mistake,” Her Majesty said. “I’ll look into this later.”

“Perhaps the information was deemed unreliable. It’s unfortunate.”

The kingdom’s government offices were filled with cretins whose attention was mostly focused on their corrupt dealings, so it wasn’t exactly surprising.

I could imagine why they might’ve been dismissed up until that point. From their point of view, the reports must’ve boiled down to someone telling them, “According to some rumors heard in a tavern overseas, there’ll be an invasion next year.” Still, ignoring them made no sense. At least now that Kilhina had actually observed movement from the enemy’s forces, the information was proven to be accurate.

“I’ll remember what you’ve told me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“But this isn’t what I called you here to talk about.”

I figured.

She’d brought up the topic without any context. She wouldn’t have called me here just to tell me a war was starting—there wasn’t a reason to inform me so urgently.

“Given the imminent threat, expedition forces will be dispatched to the Kilhina Kingdom. These will be supplied by the other three chieftain families.”

Our kingdom had five chieftain families: Ho, Rube, Bof, Noza, and Etto.

There was a prior agreement that said the Ho family wouldn’t need to dispatch soldiers. Our forces had been left in ruin after fighting in the previous crusade, so—while a precise time limit hadn’t been agreed on—we’d been assured we wouldn’t have to assemble another army to fight in the Kilhina Kingdom anytime soon.

Obviously, we wouldn’t have been excused if fifty years had passed, but it had only been ten years, so the agreement still held. It was a fact that the Ho family’s forces still hadn’t fully recovered from their losses.

Another of the five chieftains—the Etto family—had circumstances of their own. They were the most unusual of the group because they lived on and defended Aisa Island. Without the use of celestial navigation, any soldiers they dispatched would have to risk their lives just to reach the peninsula. This, along with the cost of transporting so many men, meant that asking the Etto family to supply troops simply wasn’t reasonable.

“I see.”

Okay, that makes sense.

Three families dispatching a joint force was unprecedented. It could turn out to be a terrible mistake if there was no clear chain of command to maintain order. Unfortunately, it was unavoidable. Given the current situation, none of the chieftain families wanted to dispatch reinforcements that would deplete their military might.

Still, all this talk of reinforcements for Kilhina had nothing to do with me. I wasn’t even a knight yet—I hadn’t graduated. Even if I was, I didn’t have to get involved because I was a member of the Ho family. All in all, the war was currently none of my business.

I started to worry that I might be asked to provide some of my company’s ships.

“I would also like to send a completely separate expedition force, made up of

academy students like yourself.”

Huh? I was at a loss for words. I couldn’t process what she’d just said. *Child soldiers?*

“Wha— Why would...?”

“It was my daughter’s idea.”

Her daughter? Carol suggested it? No, she can’t be that stupid.

“But that makes no sense,” I said, failing to hide my anger.

“Let me finish,” Her Majesty commanded.

I’d made her angry with me. Given the situation, I had no choice but to hear her out.

“In addition to my daughter, the heirs to the Rube and Ho family headships are also students at the Knight Academy.”

“That’s right,” I said without any enthusiasm.

“That includes you, of course.”

“Yes, I realize that.”

That really didn’t need pointing out.

“If Kilhina really does fall, it will be these three students—the three of you, that is—who will be fighting to defend our kingdom.”

Ah... Okay, I get it. That’s her thinking.

“I have some strong misgivings,” she continued. “As much as I hate to think about it, I have to consider the sort of future we’ll face if Kilhina is destroyed at the hands of crusaders. The next target will be this kingdom, won’t it? I’m worried we might need to be ready for such a situation. Have you ever met Kien, the head of the Rube family?”

“No, I haven’t.”

If I’d made an effort to attend social events, I probably would’ve met him, but I avoided those as much as possible.

“I see. Well, he may be in good health now, but he’s of an advanced age. He

was reluctant to marry in his younger days, so his son Liao wasn't born until fairly late into his life. The Ho family is an even bigger concern. I don't believe Rook is qualified to lead an army to war. I'm sure you'll be ready to lead your family's forces yourself before the next crusade, but... Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Yes... I think I can guess."

In addition to the Etto family's remote location, they also had an unusual history since they originally belonged to an independent nation known as the Trafé Kingdom.

With the collapse of the empire, the empress's surviving nine daughters held a council where they decided how to divide up the territory that remained. Princess Trafé suffered from a mental disability and couldn't contribute much to the decision-making, so a small island in the ocean, thought to have no real worth, was foisted on her for the sake of appearances, and that's where she was sent.

After she'd successfully completed the voyage, the Trafé Kingdom was born. But since her descendants were unaware of the problems of consanguineous marriages, so many of their children were stillborn that the royal line came to an end around four hundred and ten years ago. The kingdom's people then asked to become part of the Shiyalta Kingdom, since we were the closest Shanti kingdom. The Etto family had been the ones who dispatched representatives to Shiyalta, so they'd become a chieftain family.

Each head of family would cross the ocean in order to attend the Knight Academy and learn how to govern, but there was little trade between the kingdoms because of the vast distance separating them. The Shiyalta Kingdom found it convenient to treat Trafé like a largely autonomous, though not fully independent, nation. Leaving it to a chieftain family to manage the territory served that end well. This was why the Etto family had been elevated to such a state despite not having any history of military service to boast of, nor much war potential.

At any rate, it meant that it was entirely up to the other four chieftains to do the actual fighting. In terms of the number of soldiers and military potential, the

Ho family had a slight lead, the Rube family held second place, and the Bof and Noza families were a little further behind.

“If Kien dies before the next crusade arrives, two of our chieftain families will be led by youngsters with no military experience whatsoever. If this situation coincides with a new and inexperienced queen taking the throne, then our soldiers will start growing concerned.”

“So you’d like for us to have at least gone to war in some form?”

“That’s right. You don’t need to engage in combat, of course. I simply want the children who’ll be our next generation’s leaders to bear witness from the sky using kingeagles. Knights place a high value on actual war experience, don’t they? This small act could make it much easier for us to fight battles in the future.”

I quickly combined two Shanish words together to describe the role. “We’d be like military observers?”

“Military observers. Yes, that’s exactly right.”

This is so dumb. What a pain in the ass.

In my mind, I was sighing. We could call ourselves military observers as much as we liked, but there was no international law that would make the Kulati recognize us as such. To them, we were all just Shanti. Our release and return to Shiyalta wouldn’t be guaranteed under any pact. The Kulati might even target us with increased intensity when they saw Carol—blonde Shanti people were particularly valuable to them.

It was true that Carol and I were both taking the sky knight course along with the older boy from the Rube family. From Her Majesty’s point of view, that made us very different from those heading out on the expedition on foot or horseback.

She must’ve thought this wouldn’t entail much risk, but our roles didn’t guarantee our safety. We couldn’t just sit and watch a battle from a safe hilltop. We’d have to fly in from some distance, remain high enough that we wouldn’t get hit by bullets or arrows, and then go back.

No one could predict what might happen on a battlefield. Reality was too

complex to explore fully with our puny powers of imagination. We could never know how—or *when*—trouble would strike. I'd learned as much from managing Ho Company, and that was simply experience from the *business* world. I knew the chaos of war would give rise to countless unforeseen problems.

My lack of experience in the area was another problem. Then again, that was probably the whole reason Her Majesty wanted our first experience of war to be a practice run.

"But I won't be sending the three of you alone, of course. I propose selecting the most accomplished students at the Knight Academy to form a temporary unit for the purpose."

"And you're making me part of that unit?"

"Yes, of course."

"But surely I have the option to refuse? I have my family circumstances to think about."

A noble's child couldn't just live how they pleased. The effect their family circumstances had on their life was a fundamental part of being a noble. That said, even a commoner couldn't just head out on a life-or-death adventure without talking to their parents first.

Besides, I hated the idea. I didn't want to die for my kingdom, nor did I see this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"If Rook disapproves, I'll speak to him myself," Her Majesty said.

"You're clearly going through a lot of trouble. What do you expect from me?"

She wouldn't have brought me here just to gauge my interest. Normally, this would've been arranged like a summer field trip. Carol would've been the one to ask if I wanted to go with her, and I could've gotten out of it by replying with, "No, not really."

The fact that Her Majesty had set up this meeting meant that she had some special role she wanted me to play.

"You haven't guessed it yet?" Her Majesty asked with a smile.

Unfortunately, I think I have...

“Someone has to look after Carol?”

“Precisely.”

I knew it.

I understood how awkward Carol’s position was. She commanded too much respect. Both her personality and appearance made her an ideal princess in the eyes of many, so she was incredibly popular among knights. That was great for a princess, but not so good for a military unit. Her presence would disrupt the chain of command.

For example, if Carol were to be assigned to a commanding officer, she might decide to go against their orders, which, in turn, might cause other soldiers to side with her. They’d run the risk of being executed under military law afterward, but Carol’s effect on them might be just so intoxicating that they’d do it anyway. With other soldiers ready to defend her, Carol couldn’t easily be placed under arrest for disobeying orders.

It was hardly a drawback for a future queen to possess such a unifying power. Quite the opposite, actually—it was a strength worthy of lavish praise. If Carla tried using her royal status to influence people like that, she’d simply be laughed at. Unfortunately, Carol’s strength was going to be a liability on the battlefield.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I’m not sure you know how terrible the war zone might be,” I said.

“But you yourself haven’t witnessed a war, have you?”

That was true.

“No, but I can imagine it, and that makes a great difference.”

“What is it that I’m failing to imagine?”

“Desperate people being forced to flee through hot summer forests, tears streaming down women and children’s faces as they’re abducted and dragged off, tortured men hanging from trees with their genitals mutilated for the amusement of their tormentors, girls of tender age being raped by mobs of men... Scenes like those.”

“That just sounds like any war,” she replied calmly.

I couldn’t argue with her. Perhaps I should’ve realized that someone who’d been queen for as long as her would’ve learned to envision such things. I wasn’t simply trying to patronize her with a lecture on the horrors of war, however.

“It’s Carol who I’m worried about. How do you expect she’ll feel, much less react, when she sees such scenes?”

That was what I’d been getting at.

“Carol will have to walk away from everything I’ve just described in order to prioritize her own safe return,” I continued. “She’ll have to ignore tragedy and atrocity playing out before her eyes. Carol’s mind isn’t cold and rational enough to do that—she’d try to save people even if she’s ordered not to, and she’d be leading many others to their deaths in doing so.”

Her Majesty didn’t respond.

“Then we’d all die with her. We would hardly be able to leave Carol behind—we’d forever be known as the knights who abandoned the princess they were sworn to protect. It’d be a better fate to die by her side than to face a lifetime of disparagement. Don’t you think this is all unfair?”

It sounded overblown to say we’d all follow Carol to our deaths, but it wasn’t much of an exaggeration.

Many of the happenings we’d see in the war zone would be more than shocking enough to fill Carol with indignation. It was easy enough to *talk* about flying by on an eagle to take a look, but things could go very wrong in practice.

In most situations, she’d probably listen to me if I were to lose my temper and implore her to stop, but I didn’t know what might happen if we encountered something truly horrible. If, for example, we happened across a mass slaughter of civilians going on, Carol might not be the only one whose emotions would get the better of them. If the rest of the Knight Academy students sided with her, I wouldn’t be able to hold them back.

Her Majesty had just said this was necessary because we were three people carrying the future on our shoulders, but by the same token, sending us into a war where we might all die was a huge risk.

There was no need to take a risk of this magnitude, since the worst-case scenario really *would* bring ruin to the kingdom. The plan wasn't born out of necessity, so there was a chance I could change her mind.

"Perhaps..." Her Majesty agreed.

"Then please talk Carol out of the idea. That'll solve all of our problems."

"I'm not going to do that."

Wow... But why?

"What do you hope to get out of this? Carol is already idolized. She doesn't need a traumatic war experience or any practice making cold, calculating decisions on the battlefield. Knights can handle the war. Isn't that good enough?"

Our kingdom, and all Shanti states for that matter, had been operating that way for two thousand years already.

Carol was going to graduate from the Knight Academy for the sake of deepening her ties to her knights and creating secret alliances. She wasn't gearing up to be a commander on the front line. She would gain a lot of experience from an expedition, but she'd have no use for it.

"What we need now is a hero," Her Majesty said.

A hero...? Well, isn't this conversation full of twists and turns...

"Upon your return, the three of you will be lauded as the heroes of the next generation. I will award you with special honors."

"Uh..."

The idea was so ridiculous that I was shocked into speechlessness.

"That's the reason. Your expedition won't have the same significance if my daughter doesn't participate."

Don't tell me she never expected an uneventful trip there and back in the first place. She knows we'll run into trouble in the war zone. Maybe that's what she wants...

Even a small event would do it. As long as there was a story to tell, it could be

embellished as necessary. And even if nothing happened at all, it was a simple matter of making something up.

Does this woman think she can manufacture a young hero whenever her kingdom needs one?

Heroes weren't something anyone could just create—they appeared naturally. That lack of artificiality was part of what made them heroes in the eyes of others. For that reason, I felt her plan was doomed from the very start.

Perhaps “hero” was just a convenient word that I was reading too much into, but either way, this looked like an optimistic attempt to find some good in the onset of war rather than simply viewing it as a problem.

When I thought about it, I realized that an expedition really could lead to numerous benefits for the royal family. With a little luck, it could create the hero she wanted, and Carol would have an opportunity to deepen her ties with the knights. If Liao Rube and I were to gain experience, that would just be a bonus. In Her Majesty's opinion, the fact that we'd witnessed the war could make all the difference.

I couldn't say which of these merits was most important to her, but she clearly believed that they held a great amount of weight in combination. But was the sum of those heavy enough to outweigh the risk to Carol's life? If Carol never returned, she might be remembered as an unbelievable fool who led the heirs of two chieftain families to their deaths.

“This war will bring nothing but tragedy,” I argued. “I think this could go very badly for us. Carol might not make it back alive, and even if she does, she might be traumatized by the things she sees. Did you truly consider this before making your decision?”

“Listen here. I'm convinced that this kingdom has no hope for survival unless we take some risks. I know you agree.”

I get what you're saying, but...

“I understand your concerns, but I think they're excessive. As I've said, you'll be using kingeagles, and you'll have *her* close by at all times,” Her Majesty continued, looking right past me as she spoke.

The royal sword had been so quiet that I'd forgotten she was in the room. Apparently, she'd be joining us on the expedition.

I finally understood why she'd been the one to bring me here—it had been a chance for us to meet.

"I'm sorry, but I don't fully approve of this plan."

In truth, I didn't think the expedition would be particularly risky, but even a one percent chance of a worst-case scenario was enough for me to think it was a bad decision.

Her Majesty looked disappointed. "I see..."

I knew that she must've accepted the risks this plan carried because of some grand vision she held of a bright future...but I had a vision of my own.

Her expedition sounded like a short-term solution that offered no real hope. My own grand plan would take us to a whole new continent. I had been busy gathering provisions, and a small exploration ship that only needed a few crewmembers was already under construction in the Albio Republic. It would likely be finished next month.

"What happens if I refuse?" I asked.

"I'd rather you didn't."

"You'll cancel the whole thing, won't you? If Carol's alone... Well, I suppose she'd be with the Rube boy, but you wouldn't send the two of them without me."

"Even if you refuse right now, I'll still do my utmost to persuade Rook."

She'll use Rook...?

"But I know you won't refuse. You might not relish the task, but I know how much my daughter means to you. If Carol's going, you'll go."

I could hardly stop myself from groaning.

"Someone like you couldn't bear to sit here worrying after letting her go off alone. You know you'd be sparing yourself all that anguish by accompanying her."

Grr...

It felt like she was backing me into a corner as she spoke. She seemed to take my lack of refusal for granted, and I was forced to admit to myself that she was right.

After thinking for a while, I said, “I’ll go, but only under the following conditions.”

“What conditions?”

“First, please make me the captain of our expedition. If you won’t do that, then I’ll do whatever it takes to talk Carol out of it.”

“I see... What other conditions did you have?”

“Please ensure all of the expenses are borne by the royal family. If anyone seeks compensation following the death of an expedition member, please pay it yourself.”

“But of course. I had every intention to fund it. Is that all?”

“Last, please appoint someone with more integrity than Eliza Enfillet as the head of the Patent Monitoring Office.”

“Ah... The patent system...”

Her Majesty looked like she had a headache.

“I’ve actually been planning to ask for this if I was ever granted an audience for some time now. The current situation is unbearable.”

The Patent Monitoring Office was a place where people could report patent infringement. This was one of the two pillars of the patent system. The other was the Patent Examination Office, which was in charge of reviewing applications and granting patents.

When two parties couldn’t reach a resolution over alleged patent infringement, it would normally be up to a court to make a decision, but since it was well known that the courts in Sibiak were so corrupt that they barely functioned, the monitoring office made judgments independently.

The royal family must’ve known what would happen if the witches controlled

it, because the person initially selected for the top post had been someone like a civilian legal researcher. He'd asked to retire from his position quite abruptly a year ago, though, and his replacement had been Eliza—a woman from the Enfillet family of the seven witches.

To no one's surprise, Eliza was disrupting the whole system. Patent infringers had kept a low profile up until she'd gotten involved, but now they could infringe openly as long as they bribed the right people. Anyone wanting to sell their own paper just had to line the Enfillet family's pockets, and any reports of their infringement would be ignored.

The office's official reports would always offer a plausible explanation, such as a different material being used to make the paper, or some unique method being used in the production process, but competitors had basically copied every aspect of Ho Company's papermaking. We used trial and error to refine our manufacturing processes; others simply stole our ideas.

"The patents are made public once they're granted," I explained. "If the mechanism for punishing infringement ceases to function, a patent application becomes little more than an invitation for others to copy one's idea. I've never known a system so ridiculous."

"All right. I'll do something about it."

"I'm afraid I'll need more reassurance than that."

Once someone had tasted power, they knew that it was sweet as honey. The Enfillet family wouldn't be keen to give it up.

"I promise you I'll fix this. The time for humoring those women has passed."

"All right, I'm satisfied. And you'll make me the expedition leader?"

My plan was to talk Carol out of the whole thing if Her Majesty wouldn't grant all my requests.

"Yes, fine. I was planning to do that anyway."

"You were?" I blurted out much more loudly than I'd intended.

Members of the royalty were rarely willing to submit to someone else. It would be another matter if there was some empress or powerful king who

they'd come to obey through history, but the Shiyalta Kingdom wasn't such a nation. It was hard to imagine the heir to the throne being under the command of a chieftain family. In other words, I'd expected there'd be some argument over this.

"But you will have to make Carol your second-in-command," Her Majesty said.

"Of course. I know there'll be some who won't accept me as their commanding officer."

Carol's devout followers would reject me, but a few words from her would silence them.

The Rube family, however, might not be so easily convinced. Chieftain families existed as equals, rather than forming hierarchy, and Liao Rube was older than me. His family wouldn't like the idea of him being my subordinate.

I'd have my hands full if I enraged a chieftain family. Still, it was something I'd need to take care of sooner or later now that I'd been appointed expedition leader.

"There are good reasons for choosing you. As for the Rube family, I'll explain everything to them myself, so you needn't worry."

"How will you convince them?"

"Have you forgotten who your uncle was, Yuri?" Her Majesty smiled proudly. "In Kilhina, Gok is known as the hero who saved the kingdom. If his nephew and successor leads the expedition force, you'll be more easily accepted there. The Kilhinan soldiers might even welcome you with open arms and fight with increased morale... Or at least that's what I'll tell the Rube family. They won't argue with that, so don't worry."

Ah... I hadn't thought of that at all.

The enemy soldiers fighting the previous war had been defeated and routed following my uncle Gok's suicide attack and their entire invasion had been brought to a standstill as a result. I should've guessed that he would be remembered as a hero.

“Very well.”

“Oh good. I’m relieved. You’re a cautious sort, and I know you won’t chase after glory; that makes you the ideal leader. I’d never be able to rest easy unless I knew Carol was under the care of someone who keeps calm in difficult situations.”

“Oh... I see.”

Her Majesty looked pleased, but I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Now, how about some more tea? I’m sure your cup has gotten cold.”

II

What a mess I’d found myself in.

I left the royal castle and headed straight for Ho Company’s head office. While deep in thought, I rode the carriage that escorted me away from the castle. It was already dusk when I reached my destination.

I alighted from the carriage and entered the building. The woman at the front desk noticed me.

“Oh, Mr. Chairman.”

“Is Caph around?”

Caph had a place to stay nearby, but he rarely went back there. I could usually find him somewhere in this building. One of our small storage rooms contained a makeshift bed, so he generally slept on that or on one of the office couches.

“Yes, he’s here. But I suspect he’s sleeping.”

“All right. Wake him up for me. It’s urgent,” I said.

“Yes, sir.”

She must have sensed the seriousness of the situation as she hurried up the stairs.

Caph appeared soon after.

“What happened?” a sleep-deprived Caph asked as he came down the stairs

together with the receptionist.

“Is Harol here? We’ve got problems.”

“Harol? I bet he headed to a tavern after we finished unloading the goods.”

“All right. Do you know which one?”

“I do,” the receptionist said. “There’s a particular tavern where the company pays for his tab.”

“Call him back here before he drinks himself senseless. Once he’s here, the three of us need to have a meeting.”

Harol hadn’t come here directly from the Albio Republic—he’d already had a chance to get drunk and unwind while making a stop in Suomi. It wouldn’t be too cruel to drag him back to work now.

“Yes, sir, though I can’t guarantee I’ll find him.”

“If you can’t, then I’ll see him tomorrow. It’s important, but it’s not that urgent. Don’t spend all night looking for him.”

“Something important?” Caph asked. “You’re not going to tell me?”

“Not until the three of us are together. I have to go now.”

I left the company office without saying anything more.



I was at the academy.

“Here goes...”

Once I’d gotten close to White Birch Dormitory, I retrieved a cloth that I’d left hidden in the usual place and wrapped it around my head.

I headed through the woods and picked up a dry branch as I went. Once I was standing below Sham and Lilly’s dorm room window, I stopped. They lived on the second floor, so I had to throw a branch at their window from the trees. Otherwise, I’d be seen by the students on the first floor.

I’d practiced this several times before. The branch spun through the air before bouncing off the window. A moment later, the window opened and Lilly

appeared. After she'd confirmed it was me, she disappeared inside the room again.

It wasn't long before she came running out of the front entrance.

"Um, I didn't mean to rush you..."

I felt a little guilty.

"Haaah, haaah... What is it?" she panted.

Wow, she's really out of breath.

Clearly, she wasn't used to exercising. I wasn't sure why she'd come running.

"Um... Is Sham around?" I asked.

"Haaah... She got one of the teachers awful mad. She's been in detention ever since."

"She's still there this late?"

"She got it into her head durin' a table manners class that she could pull a tablecloth off a table while leavin' all the tableware behind. She got caught tryin' it at break time."

What was she thinking? No wonder the teacher's mad.

"I see... What about you, Lilly? Are you free right now?"

"Phew..." Lilly wiped the sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief.

"Yeah."

"Wanna head to a teahouse in that case?"

"Well, sure!"

Lilly smiled and accepted the invitation without a second thought. Either she was tired of being holed up in her dorm room, or she just needed some way to relax.

"Do you want to go on ahead of me in that case?" I asked.

We often met up at the office, but when we were heading to somewhere like a teahouse near the academy, she liked it if we arrived at slightly different times. She hated the idea of people being suspicious about us.

“No, I’m tired of doin’ that.”

“Huh?”

“I decided I’m done worryin’ over it.”

It sounded like she’d lost interest in dormitory politics now that she was close to graduating. It wasn’t as though she needed a clean reputation in order to win a position at the royal castle—she’d be done dealing with witches the moment she left this place.

“Then why don’t we head to the usual place?”

“Sure.”

Our usual teahouse was the one with private rooms close to the Grand Library—Ginkgo Leaf. We kept a tab there which the company paid for, so they even knew our names.

I took the black cloth off my head and walked alongside Lilly in the dimly lit night.

Any Cultural Academy students who passed by would stare at us. I didn’t think they’d recognize us in the darkness, but the very sight of a Cultural Academy student heading out with a Knight Academy student at this hour was enough to make people curious.

Given all the attention, we stayed totally quiet on the way to the teahouse.

I heard the familiar ringing sound from the bell on the door as we entered.

“Welcome. Would you like a private room?”

“Do you have one free?”

“Yes. This way, please.”

We headed straight into our private room, and someone appeared immediately to take our order. We both asked for our usuals.

“You still ain’t drinking?”

“It’s my belief that drinking alcohol before the age of twenty damages your health.”

In reality, a little drink here and there probably wouldn't have caused me any harm at my age.

"Always so serious," Lilly teased.

"Have you finished the invention we talked about?"

"Yeah, I finally finished this morning."

Lilly pulled a cloth-wrapped lump of metal from her pocket.

"I'd like to borrow it," I said before reaching for it.

Given the object's lightness in my hands, it was obvious that it was hollow inside.

There was a seam that divided it into upper and lower halves, and the whole thing popped open when the two halves were pulled apart. Inside was a collection of components. A thin piece of rope was surrounded by a fine plate with holes in it. Beside that was the ignition mechanism.

It was a lighter.

Until now, it hadn't been possible to make an ignition mechanism. There hadn't been any fuels that were volatile enough. Oils extracted from plants and animals wouldn't ignite, no matter how many sparks they were showered with.

Our oil distillation process, despite not being very precise, had produced fuel that we could use, however.

Still, this lighter was quite a bit bigger than its counterparts in my past life. The problem was that the ignition mechanism wasn't made from the ideal materials. It created sparks when a steel wheel with a rough surface scraped against a piece of flint, but these had to be fairly large to get the performance we needed.

When the wheel scraped against the flint with enough force, sparks would fly, and the wick would ignite to create a sizable flame.

It was a wonderful lighter. I knew how difficult it was to light a fire with ordinary flint, so being able to create a large flame instantaneously stirred some emotion in me.

“Shoulda known. Must be all that trainin’ you do. It ain’t so easy for me to make a flame.”

So it doesn’t easily ignite without considerable strength?

“We might be able to make improvements to things like the notches in the wheel or the size of the flint,” I suggested. “If there’s too much contact area between them, it makes the wheel hard to turn.”

“Sure does. I made it with a chisel, but maybe it’ll work better if I use a sharp blade to make finer notches.”

“How much did it all cost you?”

“One gold coin. I reckon we could sell it for two.”

A gold coin? It wasn’t cheap.

“Is it really that expensive?”

“The casing’s silver.”

Silver? Ah, so it is.

I hadn’t noticed until now, but it was far shinier than iron.

“If I try to work a piece of iron into a hollow pocket shape, it just splits apart. And it ain’t like I can use copper and lead either.”

Gold was easy to process because it was so soft, but that quality also meant that it would be ruined if dropped from shoulder height, and defects would develop over time. For example, any opening in the gold used for refilling the oil would gradually grow wider with repeated use.

It would’ve been ideal if we could’ve pressworked pieces of metal whole, but we didn’t have the machinery. Silver must’ve been in the sweet spot when it came to toughness.

“If the cost was one gold coin, that’s low enough for us to sell them... But just barely.”

We’d be selling to the upper classes. Rich households could already keep their fires burning constantly, but something like this would be convenient for bedside lamps. A lighter wouldn’t be a necessity, but people would want it to

show off their wealth. We'd be able to make it look premium once we put a little bit of branding on the silver body.

"Guess so."

"How about asking your family to make them for us?" I asked.

"Ah, that ain't a bad idea."

"You can get the silver from silver coins."

"Matter of fact, I used coins for that one right there. Pure silver's too soft."

Oh, really?

Much like their gold counterparts, pure silver coins would've been unfit for use. They'd gradually wear down as they rattled around in someone's purse. That problem was fixed by making all coins out of an alloy that included some tougher metal.

It wasn't illegal to extract materials from coins under the kingdom's laws, so coins provided us with a good source of ready-made alloy.

There was a knock at the door and a staff member entered. She placed a tray holding teacups and a teapot on the table, then she placed down our snacks.

"Would you like to order anything else?"

"That's all, thank you," I said.

She smiled in response and then left us.

I quenched my thirst with the hot tea, although I found it a little underwhelming after drinking the tea made by Her Majesty.

"The patent for it is yours, Lilly. Please make the application."

Assuming Her Majesty kept her side of the deal we'd just made, patents were about to regain their value.

"Hm?"

"The patent for the ignition mechanism."

Lilly looked confused. "I can have it...? But it's your idea."

"I don't have time to make an application."

“I can apply as your representative. I’m already gettin’ paid enough. I don’t need special treatment.”

Lilly must have taken this to be like some sort of special bonus. She wasn’t totally wrong.

“The thing is, I’ll be headed to war sometime soon,” I explained.

“Huh?”

“If I die, it’ll invalidate the patent. It’ll be safer if it’s in your name in that case.”

The current system allowed for patent rights to be inherited by someone else if the holder died, but any applications in progress would fall through the cracks if the applicant died. The patent couldn’t be awarded to a dead person, so the technology would then be open to everyone. At least that was the original idea. And since the patent gave the rights to the inventor, they couldn’t be awarded to a colleague. Basically, Lilly couldn’t just claim that it was her invention if I were to die during the application process. It would be a terrible waste of a patent.

“W-W-War?” Lilly stammered. “Have you even graduated yet?”

“As part of the next generation of knights, I’ll be heading out to witness a war for myself. I’ll only be watching from up in the air, though.”

“Forget that. You shouldn’t go.”

Yeah, that’s what I thought.

“Her Majesty asked me directly. I don’t think I can refuse.”

“But...” Lilly’s expression was one of genuine concern. I felt a mixture of gratitude and guilt.

“I’m not going there to fight, so I should be fine. But if I don’t come back...”

Lilly frowned. “Don’t even say a thing like that.”

“Take good care of Sham. I’ll make arrangements for her with company employees.”

“Why not ask your family?”

Good question. But I can't force this on them.

"It wouldn't be appropriate to tell Ho family members to run off together. If anything happens, please take her to a ship and carry her somewhere safe."

"No. You have to come back."

"But if I don't..."

"No. If I say okay, you're gonna stop worryin' about her, and then you won't come back."

That's definitely not going to happen.

"I feel better knowing you'll do this for me," I said, as if she'd agreed.

"I won't..."

No matter how much she argued, I knew she'd look out for Sham. In fact, she'd be looking out for her even if nothing happened to me.

"I do value my own life too. I've got every intention of coming back, and it's still possible that I won't have to go at all."

"I ain't listening."

"All right. I know I can count on you."

"Okay, fine..."

I sensed she still wanted to argue, but not because she was reluctant to help. I wasn't the best at understanding people, but I'd known Lilly long enough to understand that.

"I'll be taking the lighter. It could come in handy."

"When are you leavin'?"

"In about a month from now."

"Then give it back."

"Huh?"

Why can't I have it?

"Think about it—in a month from now, I'll have a better one for you."

Ah, that's why.

"Oh, okay. I appreciate it."

"No problem."

I handed back the lighter, and Lilly wrapped her hands around mine as she accepted it.

With that agreed on, we chatted for a while as I enjoyed my second tea session of the day. After that, we parted ways.



"...So that's my situation."

I'd just finished explaining everything to Caph and Harol, and they sat there in silence.

"Well... I guess you nobles have responsibilities and all that. It's just one of those things," Caph said, though he looked less than pleased. "Not much use worrying about it. Let's handle this calmly."

"What? We've gotta plan for if he dies," Harol disagreed.

That drew an irritated tsk from Caph. "Dumbass," he muttered with another disapproving click of his tongue.

"Huh?!"

"He's the brains and you're the arms and legs. You don't need to think about what to do without him."

"You're saying that if he goes down I go down with him? I'm not having that. You shut your mouth."

They were at each other's throats already. The pair had too much history to be good friends now.

"You're both sort of right," I said. "Just listen."

They both went quiet and looked at me.

"There's truth in what you said, Caph, but of course Harol's going to worry. That's why I'll leave a will with my father. I'm not going to start talking about

who's going to get what while I'm still alive, though—it'll just cause arguments."

There had to be something very wrong with things if I was seriously contemplating how to divide my inheritance at this age, but it wasn't something I could leave to chance.

"So don't worry about all that," I assured them.

I had to put Harol at ease because all of this could affect Ms. Ether—he was sure to be worried that he'd be bound to servitude for life if I died.

"Now, about how you'll manage the company while I'm gone—you can handle it, can't you, Caph? I want to leave everything besides Harol's responsibilities in your hands."

"Got it," Caph instantly agreed.

He was always reliable.

"Harol. When will the third ship be ready?"

"Uh..." Harol threw his head back and looked at the ceiling while he mentally leafed through calendar pages. "Next week."

"All right. After your next voyage, see the first and second ship back to Suomi, then head for Aisa Island."

"Aisa Island?"

"Yeah. Then set out exploring from there."

Harol looked a little dissatisfied. He clearly didn't like the idea.

The third ship that was currently under construction in the Albio Republic was an exploration vessel, a compact ship with three fore-and-aft-rigged sails.

Although it wouldn't go as fast as some vessels—masts with several square sails provided the most surface area per mast and thus traveled fastest—it didn't need as large a crew. The speedier models mentioned took significant effort from several crew members to hoist the sails.

A slower speed meant the ship would take longer to reach its destination, but it could actually travel further because a limited crew number meant resources would last longer. It was like a choice between a light vehicle that moved slowly

but with high fuel efficiency, or a large vehicle that moved fast while consuming a lot of fuel. When traveling to some unknown land, the former was much better suited to the task.

“If you say so, I’ll try it. You’re sure this new continent really exists?” Harol still looked unhappy with my decision.

Caph stared at me too, looking as though he shared Harol’s feelings.

“It does,” I said.

Given how similar this world was to Earth, it wouldn’t make sense for there to be no American continent. But I was the only one with this knowledge, so I couldn’t prove it to anyone. Without any kind of evidence, Harol and Caph were certain to doubt me.

“Is this really the time for that?” Caph asked.

I’d actually ordered Harol to use the first ship to set off exploring from Aisa Island back when the second ship was still being built, but it had been a failure. He hadn’t been able to find land at all.

It was my fault—I hadn’t given him clear instructions. According to the sea chart that Gora Hanyam had created during the voyage, the winds had carried Harol toward the Caribbean Sea, but then they’d had to turn back because food and water was running low.

They hadn’t found a single island, or any evidence that land even existed, so their efforts had been futile.

“As I’ve said before, discovering the new continent is the whole reason I started this company. I understand why you’d doubt my judgment, but please have faith in me.”

In the same way many doubted Columbus at first, I must’ve looked like someone chasing phantoms to everyone around me.

It was reasonable for people to wonder *why* I was so focused on exploration during a time of crisis, rather than treating it as a side project to be pursued when we had more time and money. It was something that had to be done no matter the cost, though.

“Besides, all those luxury goods we’re bringing back from the republic are going to plummet in value as soon as people hear about the war. Business isn’t always going to be as profitable as it is now.”

People would start hoarding their cash once they learned of the war and began fearing for the future. There’d be fewer people willing to use their income on luxuries. The cotton that Harol was buying up in the republic and selling for a high price was used to make luxury goods. We were making a killing from it, but that wouldn’t continue for much longer.

“Suppose so.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Both of them were in agreement.

“If we can’t find this new continent, diplomacy with the Albio Republic is going to be vital. Harol, if I don’t come back, you might find yourself speaking with Her Majesty directly.”

“Uh... Okay,” Harol said with a grimace.

He’d rather not?

“It sounds weird when someone your age worries about what’ll happen after they’re dead,” Caph said.

“I’m not *that* worried—I’m fairly confident nothing bad will happen.”

If a few dozen students set out, there was a chance that one or two of the less careful students wouldn’t make it back, but that was all.

“Just make sure you return,” Caph said. “We can’t move forward without you.”

“I will. I’m not planning on dying.”

I decided that we could end our discussion here.

“I have a lot to do, so I need to go,” I said while getting up from my chair. “There’s a lot I have to see to.”

Standing up must’ve gotten my circulation going, because that was when I finally realized I’d forgotten the most important thing.

“Oh, I forgot to mention. Harol, there’s something I need you to get hold of while you’re in the Albio Republic.”



“Yuri.”

When I left the head office, I noticed a black carriage parked outside. Myalo was standing in front of it, the main gate to my family’s residence right behind her. It was as if she’d taken up a part-time job guarding the place, though that obviously wasn’t why she was here.

“Please allow me to be of service.”

Myalo suddenly went down on one knee, getting dirt on her uniform. She’d obviously watched too many period dramas... Well, not that those existed here.

“Stand up,” I said.

Myalo rose to her feet like I’d asked.

This was a fairly busy street, which meant ordinary cityfolk were giving us suspicious glances as they passed by. It had to be a little embarrassing for her.

“We can’t talk here. Let’s get in the carriage.”

“After you,” Myalo said, opening the carriage door as if she was my servant, urging me to get in.

Uh... Having a girl my own age treat me like this just feels awkward, but I guess I’ll just go along with her... In more ways than one.

“Take us to the academy,” I said to the coach driver as I got in.

Myalo should’ve been the one to give them the destination, but she hadn’t disagreed with me. The coach driver remained silent as they set us moving.

Myalo remained quiet on our way to the academy, so I spent the time thinking about how I was going to deal with her.



We alighted from the carriage once we'd reached our destination. The carriage left us after Myalo ordered the coach driver to go back.

"Myalo, who told you?" I asked as we walked down the familiar path into the dorm.

"Oh? Well..."

She hesitated to answer, as if she wasn't sure she could reveal her source.

"I don't need to know exactly how you found out, but please tell me the expedition hasn't been announced yet. If there's a crowd of eager students waiting for me in the dorm..."

"No, it's nothing like that."

So the announcement wasn't made.

"I heard it from Her Highness," Myalo explained. "I learned where you were going after speaking to her yesterday."

It turned out her source had been Carol, and that she'd known since yesterday. Her Majesty had said that it had all been Carol's idea, so that must've been when she'd first approved the plan.

I couldn't imagine the conversation that had taken place between Carol and Her Majesty, but considering Her Majesty's attitude earlier, it wouldn't surprise me if she'd spurred Carol on. Then again, that didn't make much difference.

"Does Carol know already?" I asked. "About me being captain, that is."

"She does. She just returned from the royal castle a short while ago looking dour."

That meant Myalo had heard the news from Carol, then headed straight for the Ho residence.

"Ah. Okay."

I was a little reluctant to return to the dorm, but Carol was always going to find out regardless. I'd have to face her sooner or later.

"What is it you're planning to do out there, Yuri?" Myalo asked with great interest.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to save Kilhinan people?”

What?! What’s she talking about? If it’s not period dramas, she must be reading too many novels.

“Why would it be my job to save them?” I asked.

“It isn’t?”

Of course it’s not. Just who do you think I am?

“If that’s your plan, then you’re definitely not coming with me,” I said.

“Oh, no. I wasn’t planning on anything like that either.”

She said that wasn’t what she’d had in mind, and I knew she wasn’t a selfless do-gooder, but she’d left me feeling a little suspicious. It made me wonder—if I’d said I wanted to save Kilhina, would Myalo have responded that she’d been thinking the exact same thing?

“Her Majesty did say something about a hero, but personally, the students who want to go for the sake of being a hero are the ones I’m most worried about. That’s not our mission,” I explained.

“Oh... Okay.”

She doesn’t sound convinced...

“Let me give you a little test.”

Myalo’s face suddenly turned serious. “Okay.”

“What’s the main priority of this mission?”

“To make sure Her Highness returns safely... I think,” Myalo replied instantly.

Precisely.

“All right. And what’s the main thing we need to watch out for while achieving that objective?”

“Projectiles fired by the Kulati?”

Well, that’s certainly one problem. Stray projectiles are a worry for sure.

“That’s a concern, yes, but not the biggest one. The real problem is that Carol might want to be a hero.”

“Oh... I suppose she might.”

“If anyone else gets killed trying to save people, we’ll just say it’s their own fault for getting carried away and we’d complete our mission regardless. But getting Carol home alive *is* our mission.”

“Now that I think about it, you’re right. It’s exactly as you say.”

“If you understand that, then I’ll bring you with me.”

Just like that, I’d given Myalo permission to come with me. I figured I’d test her first, but I was never going to have the option of leaving her behind.

“Thank you. I’ll do my utmost to be of service,” Myalo said boldly, a look of delight on her face.

When she said she’d do her utmost, I knew she wasn’t lying. She’d give it all she had.

“Just don’t get in my way,” I warned her.

“Of course. I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so...” Myalo replied, taken aback.

“Do you know what I mean by getting in my way?”

“I thought I did, but... You don’t mean it literally?”

“I didn’t want to take you with me. We’re headed to a dangerous place—I’d rather leave everyone who’s important to me right here.”

Myalo instantly realized what I meant. Her expression defied description, but if I had to try, I’d say she looked sad. From her point of view, my concern for her was like an unwanted gift.

“All right... But you know, sometimes it’s useful to have those important people with you, even in a dangerous situation.”

“I know. You’re always useful—you’re more capable and reliable than anyone

I know.”

Well, more to the point, she had qualities that I lacked. She was methodical, approached things from a very different point of view, and possessed both connections and knowledge. There was no doubt that she’d be useful.

“I’m honored.” Myalo bowed her head, genuinely pleased by the compliment.

“But you’re also my weak point. If I have to sacrifice multiple people to get Carol home, I’ll do it. But I couldn’t abandon you. I’ll be gaining a competent and reliable soldier, but now there’ll be twice as many people who I can’t leave behind.”

She seemed less pleased by that remark. “Are you saying that because I’m a girl?”

“No.”

“That’s not the reason?”

“What if the roles were reversed?” I asked her. “Suppose I became a liability out there. Would you be able to give up on me, like a soiled glove discarded by the roadside, just because I’m a boy?”

Myalo didn’t have an immediate response to that. We passed the next ten seconds in silence, save for the sound of our boots scuffing against the dirt.

Finally, she spoke. “I don’t think I could do it...but you might have to.”

It wasn’t the response I’d expected, but I had to agree.

“Yeah, I’ll be the one who has to make those choices.”

“That’s right.”

“But even if I have to, that doesn’t mean I can. I’m not made of stone.”

“Indeed.”

“I wouldn’t want to be the sort of person who can make those decisions easily. But I might be forced into it, just like you said.”

It was a difficult issue. Perhaps I should’ve left Myalo behind, rather than leading her into a battle.

“I wouldn’t want a commanding officer made of stone either,” Myalo said with a slight smile. “That would be a wearisome service.”

When I saw her smile, it put me at ease too.

“Yeah. Putting your heart into your work for the sake of a rock would be a miserable life.”

“Okay. I understand what you’re telling me, Yuri. I’ll be careful, and I’ll make sure I don’t get in your way.”

Myalo was probably making sure we wrapped up this discussion now that we’d reached the dorm’s entrance.

“That’ll make things easier for me.”

When we entered the building, we encountered the same old relaxed atmosphere. The news clearly hadn’t spread far yet.

After parting with Myalo, I entered my room.

Someone else was already there, and despite being the source of all my problems, *she* was scowling at *me*.

I can’t believe her.

“What’s with that face?” I asked.

Carol was sitting cross-legged on her bed and sulking.

She turned her head away from me. “Hmph.”

Part of me wanted to grab her puffed-up cheeks and mess with them, but I resisted the urge.

“You don’t like Her Majesty’s decision?” I asked, having a seat on my own desk chair.

We’d better get this conversation over with.

“I didn’t say that...”

“Just so there’s no misunderstanding, I didn’t volunteer for the job. In fact, this is nothing but trouble for me.”

“Yeah, I guessed as much. You never did like taking responsibility for

anything.”

“Well, if you don’t like it, you don’t have to go. It wouldn’t bother me.”

I’ll jump for joy in fact.

“If I was ready to give up that easily, I wouldn’t have proposed the idea to my mother in the first place. I just don’t like having you as expedition leader.”

“You don’t have to like it; that’s just how it is. And if you don’t obey my orders out there, I’ll tie you up and drag you home.”

I had to make that clear.

“Mother told me that you were afraid I’d do something reckless. Is that how you think of me?”

Huh...?

“Well... You’re a sheltered princess with a strong sense of moral responsibility and an inability to stop herself from charging in once she gets worked up over something. You’re also the perfect war trophy for the enemy. That’s what I think.”

If the enemy caught sight of Carol, they wouldn’t believe their luck.

“What did you just say?!”

“Don’t forget the time you stalked me and got caught by a gang, or the time you were curious about gambling and lost all your money.”

“Grrr... Don’t bring up ancient history!”

I kept hitting her with the facts. “You’ve matured a little, but you’re still impulsive, and you think you have to fight every injustice. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, just that it’ll get you into trouble on a battlefield. That’s the whole reason Her Majesty came to me for help.”

“Hmph...” Carol fell quiet.

“Myalo’s coming too. With me and her handling things, it should all go smoothly.”

“I know it will, but...”

“Then we’re all in agreement?”

“Yes. It’s not like I had a say anyway.”

No, you didn’t.

“By the way, I’ve got a message for you from mother,” Carol said.

“What is it?”

“The announcement to the Knight Academy students will come from the royal family. I’ve brought the document for you to see. She wants you to put this on display within the next week.”

Everything had already been set in motion.

III

Announcement

Imperial Year 2318, April 4

The following is declared in the name of Her Majesty the Queen:

Following the outbreak of a defensive war anticipated within the Kilhina Kingdom, a military observation unit will be formed comprising Yuri Ho of Year 8 as the expedition captain, and Carol Flue Shaltl of the same year and Liao Rube of Year 12 as vice captains. The unit will be dispatched for the purpose of observing the war zone and obtaining a deeper understanding of the strategies employed by the invading nations.

Accordingly, participants will be recruited from among the mature students of the Knight Academy.

The requirements listed by the accompanying appendix must be met prior to any application.

Volunteers meeting the conditions should submit their application, together with written consent bearing the seal and signature of a parent or guardian, by the sounding of the morning bell on April 14.

The signature of a parent or guardian may not be provided by a relative residing in the royal capital. Students from distant territories who would

otherwise be unable to make their application prior to the deadline are given special permission to use the government’s express mail service. Those students are advised to dispatch a letter explaining the situation from the royal castle’s messenger eagle cages.

Applications are to be submitted to the dedicated mailbox provided in front of the Year 8 dormitory.

On April 15, this being the day after the submission deadline of April 14, interviews will be conducted in Classroom 315 of the Knight Academy building. Applicants will subsequently be notified of their application’s acceptance or rejection.

Applicants should be aware of the following:

Participation application forms are legally binding and must be read carefully before signing.

Members of the military observation unit will temporarily be bound by special purpose military laws for the duration of the operation.

These military laws hold power under order of Her Majesty the Queen, and the commanding officers may not be held personally responsible for legal judgments made under those laws.

This includes exemption from responsibility in the event that a participant is killed during the operation or executed following a gross violation of military law. Applicants should consider this carefully prior to submitting their application.



Appendix (accompanies the declaration dated Imperial year 2318, April 4) To be eligible for participation in the observation unit, applicants must meet the following requirements: (I) The applicant has demonstrated sufficient physical and mental capability by earning enough course credits to pass the appropriate threshold below.

Year 6: 200 credits

Year 7: 220 credits

Year 8: 250 credits

Year 9: 270 credits

Year 10: 290 credits

Year 11 and above: 310 credits

(II) The applicant is physically fit with no concerns regarding their health.

(III) The applicant can provide one plainrunner, one spear, one dagger, and one set of armor (light armor made primarily from leather or similar) for their personal use.

The three conditions above are absolute.

In addition, applicants will ideally meet the following two conditions: (IV) Since the observation unit's primary objective is to make observations from above, applicants will ideally be enrolled in the sky knight training program.

(Those in possession of a license to fly or level-1 solo-flight permission will be recognized as sufficiently skilled riders.) (V) The applicant can provide their own kingeagle.

(Applicants meeting condition [V] are exempt from the requirement to provide a plainrunner as stipulated by condition [III].) ✧ ✧ ✧

"All right. How's this?" I asked.

"This looks fine," Myalo said.

"Looks good to me," Liao Rube, the eldest son of his family, agreed.

Liao had entered Year 12 this year and was, of course, going to join the observation unit.

The three of us were holding a secret meeting in an empty classroom. We'd kept Carol out of it. I could just imagine her yelling, "Why'd you leave me out, you jerks?!" if she ever found out.

"Sorry, but is it all right if I just call you Liao?" I asked him.

"Sure. Doesn't bother me."

Normally, I'd be more respectful toward an older student, but that just wasn't

going to feel right once I was his commanding officer.

“This might sound blunt, but are you sure it doesn’t bother you that you’re going to be my subordinate?”

“What is this, an interview?”

“I couldn’t stop you from joining the unit even if I wanted to. I’m just making sure we’re on the same page.”

This guy was my second biggest concern after Carol.

Almost every Knight Academy student was the kid of a vassal who served a chieftain family, so it wasn’t wildly inaccurate to say about a quarter of the academy was under the Rube family’s control. That meant Liao could turn on me at a crucial moment, declaring, “I just don’t trust this guy. He’s manipulating Princess Carol. Anyone who agrees, join me.” If he were to rile up his subordinates, I’d find myself in a horrible situation.

“Someone my age should’ve graduated by now,” Liao replied. “I’m not going to act like I’m the boss around here.”

“From what I’ve heard, you’re planning to graduate this year.”

I’d gotten that information from Myalo.

He had 280 credits when he was nineteen, and then 310 when he was twenty. He’d already had enough credits to graduate back then, but he was still here. Since Liao wasn’t lacking credits, I knew there had to be a compulsory course he hadn’t finished, and that could only be deliberate. Liao must’ve avoided taking one of the compulsory courses because he didn’t want to graduate.

Three hundred credits was enough to graduate from the Knight Academy, but only after passing all compulsory courses. Otherwise, someone would be stuck at the academy, regardless of how many credits they had.

In addition to the usual martial arts and war strategy classes, the optional classes included some Cultural Academy courses such as classic literature, law, and Kulatish. Obviously, a student couldn’t be allowed to graduate from the Knight Academy with nothing but the credits gained from those courses.

Liao’s family customs said that he’d have to serve alongside his family’s

vassals to prove his worthiness as successor to the family headship. This meant Liao was something like a student who refused to submit his final dissertation in order to delay a job at his family-owned business. Life in a Knight Academy dorm was so easy for students over twenty that many chose to put off their graduation, just like Liao.

Still, despite being a notorious hedonist, Liao Rube had participated in the Knight Academy Combat Tournament several times. Astonishingly, he'd even won the tournament at least once.

"If you'd known early last year that a crusade force was gathering, would you have graduated by now?"

"I sure wouldn't have stuck around here."

That was a yes. If he had graduated, he'd already be a fully-fledged soldier, leading an order of knights under the Rube family.

"Not that it weighs on my mind," he added. "I don't see why I should risk my life for idiots in Kilhina."

"I see."

"Oh, sorry."

Hm? Why'd he apologize?

"For what?"

"I meant no disrespect to Sir Gok."

Ah, that makes sense.

"I'm not offended."

I'd since learned that mounting a kingeagle strike for the sake of Kilhina was an odd thing for Gok to have done as the head of a chieftain family.

A chieftain's role was to wield their spear for Her Majesty, and while they might lay down their lives for their own kingdom, they didn't have to die for another's.

Anyone heading to war knew that they might not come back, so there was nothing unusual about dying an unfortunate death during military service. But

there was no need to join a suicide squad and go to one's death willingly.

The Queen of Kilhina no doubt considered him a savior, and he'd earned himself some impressive posthumous decorations, but from our own queen's perspective, such actions were probably more of a source of headaches than a matter for praise.

"Does the Rube family know much about the situation in Kilhina?" I asked.

"We know more about that than anyone else in Shiyalta."

It was unsurprising that they were monitoring Kilhina's readiness for war, given that their province was on the border between the kingdoms. Although there hadn't been any disputes since the founding of our nations, keeping track of the neighboring country's army was the natural responsibility of any ruler near the border.

"And how likely is victory according to the Rube family's analysis?" I asked out of curiosity.

"Slim chances. The forces there haven't got a plan, they just want us to bolster their army."

"Ah..."

"And there's infighting, even now. If it keeps up, they'll lose. There won't be a miracle like last time either—the enemy's learned from it."

The Rube family analysis sounded pessimistic.

"To be honest, I don't think they can win either," I said.

"Based on what?" he asked. "Intuition?"

"More than intuition. There's a long history of Shanti kingdoms being paralyzed by infighting whenever an invasion occurs. Kilhina's already lost territory in the north."

Though there were exceptions like the Tena Kingdom and Mahlaus, most Shanti nations hadn't been structured much differently from Shiyalta. There was always a royal family, some territory directly under royal control, and some autonomous provinces around it that belonged to chieftains.

The biggest problem with this system was that most resources needed to raise an army were split between the multiple chieftains and the royal family.

Chieftain families were so fiercely independent that when an invasion came they'd use their forces to protect themselves. Meanwhile, the royal family was headed by a queen who, despite commanding a great deal of respect, couldn't lead forces into war.

A national crisis called for the nation to fight as a unified whole, but chieftains would hold back their forces for fear they might be depleted. Even if the queen did appoint someone as supreme commander of the nation's forces, they'd be left with the task of trying to arrange those disparate forces into some sort of unified whole before they could begin fighting.

"I see you've done your homework," Liao said.

"But the Rube family must rely on Kilhina's existence more than anyone else. I'm surprised you're so calm about it."

"Yeah, that's true."

If Kilhina ceased to exist, Rube Province on the kingdom's northern border would be next in the firing line. Thus, his family would be inclined to preserve its war potential as much as possible.

"The royals are too laid back. They make chieftains send out reinforcements, but they never give up a single soldier from the first order of the royal guard."

Carol might've been angry if she'd heard that, but it was understandable that the Rube family saw it that way.

The royal family provided leadership, but didn't take action. They collected taxes from chieftain families, assassinated anyone who tried to rebel, and if that failed, they'd order another chieftain family to beat the misbehaving family into submission.

Ordinary knights had little awareness of this; they simply revered the royalty while swearing loyalty to a chieftain. For chieftains at the top, however, it felt like there was nothing positive about their relationship with the royal family. All they got in return for dispatching reinforcements was a monetary reward that didn't even begin to cover their costs.

“I understand how you feel, but don’t say anything like that in front of Carol,” I warned him.

“I know. Don’t worry, I’m not stupid.”

“Carol is, though,” I said. “I’m sure you’re here expecting to gain some prestige from all this, but we could come back in disgrace too. We’re taking an idiot out to war.”

I was alluding to the possibility that Carol might be killed.

Liao immediately guessed what I was hinting at and replied appropriately. “I’ve heard about you. I know you’re competent enough to take one girl out to a battle without losing her.”

“No one can predict what’ll happen on the battlefield. Even a soldier on a kingeagle will die if a stray arrow hits them in the eye.”

“There’s no point worrying about that kind of bad luck. Nothing’s certain in battle.”

“Got that right.”

I was glad he understood that at least. I couldn’t force him to quit the expedition regardless, so I decided not to question him too much.

“Now let’s talk about personnel,” I said.

“Sure.”

“This is Myalo Gudinveil. I’m sure you know her.”

“I’ll forgo a proper self-introduction for the time being. I’m Myalo.” Myalo bowed her head without rising from her chair.

“Yeah, I know you,” Liao said.

He’d probably heard nothing but vicious rumors, but Myalo’s name was familiar to him.

“She’s our Chief of Staff,” I said.

“Chief of Staff?”

That was a job title I’d made up myself using Shanish words. The people of

this kingdom had no existing title to describe that sort of military role.

“She’ll act as my advisor and take care of general administrative work. She’ll only accept orders from me directly, but she won’t be able to give orders to anyone else.”

“All right.”

“I would’ve liked to make her a vice captain, but I figured it would cause some conflict.”

Since Myalo came from a witch family, knights naturally distrusted her. That wouldn’t matter if she was put in charge of enlisted soldiers born to commoners, but all of the members of our unit would be knights-in-training.

They’d naturally distrust her, and if I were to make her vice captain, I’d have to hear a swath of complaints about having to follow orders from a Gudinveil. Anyone who would disobey her could be punished under military law, but she wasn’t physically strong. If more than half of the knights hated witches, it’d be Myalo, rather than her subordinates, who’d find herself facing punishment.

“You’re a vice captain, just like the announcement said,” I told Liao.

“All right. It’s an honor to serve.”

“Right. Well, you and Myalo are going to be working hard tomorrow,” I said, foisting administrative work on them.

“Tomorrow? Doing what?”

“We need to check that the students submitting applications are genuinely qualified. I’m hoping we can handle things ourselves without needing any outside help. I want you two, plus Carol, to start making preparations.”

“The three of us? And what’ll you be doing?” Liao asked with a frown.

He probably wanted to make sure I wouldn’t be napping in my room while they did all the work.

“I’ll enter Kilhina tomorrow.”

“Kilhina? You’re going to stay there and wait for the expedition to come to you?”

“No, I’ll be back to conduct interviews. I just need to see the area for myself. It’s too dangerous to head there without scouting it out first.”

That task would take time. I couldn’t just rush it after the war started, and I couldn’t exactly leave it to someone else either.

“All right. And I’m guessing we’ll do what we can while you’re gone?”

“Exactly. Myalo’s good at making sure things run smoothly. She’ll handle things better than I could.”

Myalo didn’t say anything; she simply turned to Liao and bowed her head. It was like she was saying she was happy to be working with him.

“Myalo has my absolute confidence, and Carol trusts her too. I can’t force you to do the same, but it’ll make things easier if you do.”

“I’ll decide for myself.”

Naturally. Asking someone to trust someone else was an odd request in the first place.

“I won’t accuse her of being a stooge for the witches if that’s what you’re worried about,” Liao reassured me.

“Good. All right, let’s wrap things up for today. Anything you wanted to ask?”

“Nothing. Until we start recruiting people, there’s not much to do anyway.”

That was true.

“In that case, we’re done here. You’re free to go.”



I left them and headed for the Ho residence—I’d been summoned there. In fact, I’d received a message asking for my presence soon after I’d been summoned to the royal castle.

Once I was through the main gate, I found Rook and Suzuya waiting for me at the main entrance. They weren’t smiling; this wasn’t some heartwarming family moment.

Ugh...

I forced myself to approach them, resisting the urge to turn back around.

"Yuri, come here," Rook said.

"Yes, father."

Rook opened the front door and stepped into the building.

I followed.

When I looked at Suzuya, she looked crushed.

We entered the study and Rook silently took a seat.

"Sit."

I obeyed orders, choosing one of the soft chairs. I knew he wasn't pleased with me.

"Why didn't you come talk to us?"

I knew he'd ask that.

"It's just... I didn't think it was important enough to bother you over."

"If you don't understand how important going to war is, then you'd better not go."

There was no arguing with that.

"No... That isn't what I meant."

"Did you think you could hide it from us until the day you set out?"

"No."

I knew I couldn't, but I'd thought that it'd be easy to discuss after they'd heard it from Her Majesty.

What was it she said about taking Rook into it? Can't believe I trusted her.

"Her Majesty was insistent," Rook said.

It turned out she really *had* talked to him. Rook must've guessed what I was thinking.

"I won't object," he added. "But why didn't you talk to me?"

"I..."

“You thought it wasn’t necessary?”

It’s true...

“I didn’t think I had a choice.”

“You can’t just decide everything yourself.”

Rook was correct. As the eldest son of the Ho family, I couldn’t just do as I pleased. Even if I couldn’t refuse, I should’ve waited on giving an answer until I’d at least spoken to him.

“I’m not here to talk to you as head of this family. I’m talking to you as your father.”

That made me feel even more guilty.

Rook looked dispirited. “How do you think your mother feels?”

Oh, that’s right—decent parents do worry about their children. I should’ve remembered how much they fret over their son.

“I’m sorry.”

My father back in Japan had never cared what his own son was doing. Once he’d found another woman and realized that I wouldn’t take over his company, he completely ignored me. I doubt he would’ve shed a single tear if news of my death had reached him. That’s just the sort of person he was.

Rook and Suzuya would cry if I died, though, and not just for a month or two. They’d remember me for their entire lives. The love they had for their own son was pure.

I realized just how selfish my actions had been.

“If you understand what I’ve said, then go see your mom.”

“Yes, father...”

I left the study.

I entered the room where Suzuya was waiting and found her sitting on a chair, her face slumped on a small round table. She lifted her head up when I entered; it looked like she’d been crying.

“Yuri.”

“Mother.”

“Come to me.”

I did as I was told and walked over to her.

When I got close, she stood up and hugged me as though she couldn't hold back her emotions. I'd already grown taller than her, but she stood on her toes so that she could wrap her arms around my neck and hold me tight.

“Promise me you'll come back.”

“I promise.”

It was an oath I wasn't sure I could keep.

“I'll be fine. I'm sure father told you so too. It's an easy job; nothing worth worrying over.”

“Really? That makes me feel better.”

Suzuya put on a brave smile, though it was obvious that she didn't feel better at all.

“Yes. I promise I'll come home safely.”

“I've always told you to treat girls well, but it'll all be for nothing if it gets you killed. There'll be a lot of people waiting for you at home.”

“I know that. I'm not going to do anything too dangerous.”

In an attempt to soothe Suzuya, I came up with one reassurance after another.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I won't get anywhere near danger.”

“Well... That makes me feel better.”

“Please don't worry.”

I felt terrible.

I have to make it home, I told myself once more.



I left home and went back to the dorm to collect my belongings, then headed to the kingeagle cages.

The sun was already low in the sky, but I wanted to set out that day. I'd already notified the Knight Academy office. I wouldn't be penalized for the lectures or training sessions I'd miss while we were preparing.

I entered the kingeagle cage, led Stardust outside, and gave him some sliced meat I'd gotten from a butcher.

Stardust picked up the cut of meat in his sharp beak, then gulped it down.

"Kuuur..."

Stardust stopped eating the meat before he'd quite finished it all—he must've had his fill. He was smart enough to know not to overeat when I was about to take him flying.

I cleaned up the leftovers by throwing them into the kingeagle cage, then I put a saddle—one that bore the Ho family crest that I'd brought here with me—on Stardust's back. I tightened the straps one by one.

"All right."

To finish, I shook the saddle from side to side to check it was on correctly. It was firmly secured.

I hopped up onto Stardust. When I pulled on the reins just slightly, he readied himself for takeoff, as if he was waiting for the signal.

With a few powerful beats of his wings, he carried us up into the air.

Chapter 4 — On the Road

On the first day, I stopped at an inn without flying very far. On the second day, I'd reached the northern edge of Rube Province by the time the sun was setting. That was where the border between Shiyalta and Kilhina was located.

The border between the two kingdoms was naturally defined by a river known as the Olt.

There was a valley with steep sides upstream, but the river grew wider downstream, making it slow and shallow.

The increase in the water level caused by thawing snow in summer must've made it difficult to build bridges, because there had always been just two bridges across.

I was viewing one of them—known as the Zuck Bridge—from high in the sky. It was the one located at the upstream side of the Olt River.

The longer bridge, located at the downstream part of the river, was known as Hoto Bridge. The upstream area was at the foot of a mountain amidst an undulating forest, so most travelers preferred to use the flat roads near the river mouth and cross the border using Hoto Bridge.

That made Zuck Bridge something like a back road that few people used, and yet it was currently crowded. Sharp-eared people must've heard about the coming war and decided to leave Kilhina as soon as possible. The crowd was moving in one direction—they were all headed into Shiyalta.

I'd never actually seen Zuck Bridge myself until now, except in paintings. It was a place famous for its scenery—the forested valley, combined with the historic stone bridge and mountain range in the background, made this a popular subject for landscape paintings.

I could imagine how beautiful the place might look in ordinary times. Unfortunately, the crowd of fleeing refugees made the view look more like a war scene rather than a landscape painting.

Zuck Bridge's piers were a famous piece of architecture that I could see clearly when I descended a little. They were relics from the days of the empire that looked like they'd grown out of the boulders lying in the valley's center. Each of the natural boulders, which lay at the foundations of the piers, were covered by rock that had been mostly carved into a specific shape. They created an acute angle pointing upstream, which prevented the foundations from being damaged by any trees and rocks that might've been washed down the river.

Taken as a whole, each pier looked like a natural rock wearing a stone shoe, with a pointed toe that divided the river's flow. The piers then extended upward like legs and formed broad arches that connected the cliffs at either side of the bridge.

Sadly, the arches weren't from the days of the empire—those had collapsed in an earthquake a hundred years ago, which had necessitated their reconstruction. Still, the new arches looked at home with the rest of the structure.

In fact, construction work on the Zuck Bridge was underway at that very moment. The work was going on at the bridge's downstream side, where people were building a wooden walkway alongside the stone bridge to widen it. The Rube family had probably taken it upon themselves to do this.

Three or so round, broad logs had been installed as pillars where there was space on the foundation stones, and paths had been built on top of the pillars. It was a precarious structure, but the sturdy stone bridge beside it would probably hold it up. Besides, the people using it wouldn't be much of a load, and anything heavier, such as horses, could stick to the stone bridge.



I had another reason for visiting Kilhina besides scouting the area—I wanted to record accurate coordinates for the major cities.

Traveling by kingeagle proved surprisingly difficult. It took more than intuition to find a destination. I had to remember the route from one town to another, then I needed to make sure to keep the roads below me in view while I traveled.

But I wouldn't have to do that once I knew the coordinates of the cities. I'd be

able to note their positions accurately on a map, then I'd be able to use a compass to determine the quickest route between them while taking into account magnetic deviation.

That was my motivation as I flew from one major town to another, recording their coordinates. Three days passed by in no time at all while I was busy with the task.

After I'd entered the Kilhina Kingdom, I encountered a glum atmosphere in every town I visited. The fleeing refugees must've brought the bad news with them, and shop owners wondered whether they should close shop and run too. The rush of outsiders passing through had also led to a spike in crime.

As things were, I couldn't leave a valuable creature like a kingeagle in the care of an inn while I stayed there, so instead I simply bought meat for us to eat and then quickly left each town.

During the day, I used my sextant to make observations around noon. On clear nights, I measured the magnetic deviation using the position of the North Star—although there didn't appear to be any significant amount of deviation here on the peninsula. My compass always pointed toward the North Star without any deviation.

Each evening, I walked through the woods and collected branches while scouting for a place to sleep before the sun set. I needed to get a fire going before it got too dark because the nights were still cold.

One evening, I was doing much of the same—the sun sinking in the sky behind me—when I headed deeper into the trees and found a clearing where local residents must've cut down the trees to use as firewood. I decided to make a bonfire there. I put ten branches together, tore off a scrap of paper, then soaked it using the bottle of gasoline I was carrying.

It caught fire easily when I showered it with sparks from a piece of flint.

I let the flames spread to one of the thin branches that looked like it would catch fire easily, and then I gradually fed more wood into the fire. Once it got going, I knew there was no risk of it dying.

I sat down on the flattest tree stump I could find.

“How long have you been watching me?” I asked.

There was a rustling sound, and a person stepped out.

“Ah, you noticed me?”

He hadn’t tried to call anyone else over, so I’d assumed he was a lone bandit. But now that I saw him, I thought otherwise—he was too well dressed for a bandit.

The man stood there awkwardly scratching his head. He didn’t look even remotely threatening.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I was going to set up camp, but I thought maybe I’d ask if we could camp together.”

His story was supported by the pile of branches in his hands that he’d clearly spent some time gathering. He wasn’t lying.

“I don’t mind.”

More firewood meant we’d both be warmer. I was all for that. Still, when a relatively rich youngster like me encountered a strange man while out camping, there was always a risk of being robbed. I couldn’t be too cautious.

The man seemed to have sensed my concern. “I’m armed, but you can hold on to my weapon.”

He was carrying a small bow. I couldn’t tell at a glance, but he was probably wearing a dagger too. Still, he appeared so meek that I couldn’t imagine he meant any ill will toward me at all.

“It’s fine,” I said. “We can’t be sure bandits won’t attack during the night. I doubt you’d sleep easy if you’re unarmed.”

“You’re right, but I’m not sure I’d be much good in a fight regardless,” he admitted bashfully.

He was rather thin, so I could see why he wasn’t confident. He might’ve found some success as a conman, but he clearly wasn’t in any shape to fight.

“Well, if you don’t mind.” The man put a thick cloth down on another tree

stump at the opposite side of the fire and sat on it.

“Got enough to eat?” I asked him.

“Yes.”

The man took out some meat from a leather bag attached to the side of his pack.

It wasn't the sort of meat you'd find any decent food vendor selling. It was the leg of a deer or a similar creature. He'd probably hunted for it himself using his bow. It didn't look rotten, but he hadn't drained it well enough—blood was dripping from the leather bag. He mustn't have known how to prepare game.

Either this had been his first experience hunting, or he'd always had someone else to cut and prepare it for him in the past. Another possibility was that he simply hadn't had time to process it properly.

In any case, meat like that was barely edible. The stale blood within would congeal while it was being cooked.

“Would it be all right if I cook it on your fire? I'm a little hungry.”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

I wondered why someone so well dressed would be eating bad meat.

In fact, he wasn't just well dressed—he was wearing a badge on his chest that identified him as a knight.

Similar badges were awarded after graduating from the Knight Academy and were known as knight medals. It wasn't like everyone who held a knighthood had to walk around wearing one, but ordinary people were forbidden to wear them. They couldn't even own them; anyone who found one had to turn it in immediately.

In reality, most people wouldn't bother to return a medal they'd found, but no one without a knighthood would be stupid enough to stick it on their chest and walk around wearing it. They'd be charged with the serious crime of identity theft if they got caught.

I was sure a similar system existed here in Kilhina. Chances were the man was a knight. In that case, he was possibly on the run after committing some crime.

Anyone who graduated from the Knight Academy would be part of the intellectual elite regardless of whether they actually worked as a knight. Virtually every graduate was capable of finding a job that put good food on the table. The same should've applied to Kilhina.

There were some knights whose pride wouldn't let them work jobs associated with commoners, but that same pride wouldn't allow them to hunt for their food as they roamed around, no matter how poor they became.

"Actually, don't cook that," I said.

"Oh... All right." He drew the meat away, looking disappointed.

"My eagle can eat it. You can have some of mine instead. It was properly prepared and seasoned by a butcher."

His face lit up. "Oh, I see. Thank you."

He couldn't have been looking forward to his own meat. It might've been more nutritious, but no one enjoyed fighting the urge to vomit while eating.

"Should I give it to your bird now?"

"If you like. He'll be hungry."

The man held the meat in front of Stardust who picked it up in his large beak.

I was a little worried, but since it wasn't crawling with maggots or anything, I doubted Stardust would get sick. It was actually preferable to give kingeagles raw meat over salted meat, so it might've even been a healthier meal for him. I'd been buying salted meat from butchers because that was all they had, and it wasn't as if wild animals drained their meat before eating it anyway.

"This is a fine eagle. He's so well behaved," he noted while admiring Stardust.

An unruly kingeagle would've snatched the meat away and gulped it down. The way Stardust took it politely was proof of his thorough training.

The fact that the man had noticed a thing like that was further proof that he was a knight. If he'd merely put on the knight medal for the sake of conning me, he wouldn't have dealt with kingeagles before.

"Right? I'm proud of this bird."

“Pardon me for saying this, but I can’t help but notice that you serve the Ho family.”

It hadn’t taken him long to notice. Then again, that wasn’t a surprise—I’d left the saddle, emblazoned with an obvious family crest, in full view. It wasn’t like I was undercover or anything though, so it didn’t really matter.

“That’s right. I’m actually curious about your background too,” I said casually.

“Oh, but of course. I have nothing to hide. I’m Gino Toga.”

Toga... I recognized the name as one of Kilhina’s chieftain families.

If his father had been someone like Rook, whose knight training had gone so far off the rails that his train had turned into a bus, then the name might not hold any importance; similarly to how Ho was once a ranch owner’s name. But it was only the central members of the family who’d use the surname to introduce themselves, so in all likelihood, anyone calling themselves “Toga” had to be someone of some importance.

What’s a guy like him doing in a place like this?

“Gino, is it? I’m Yuri.”

“I see. Sir Yuri? Nice to meet you.” Gino bowed his head.

“If we’re done with the introductions, let’s start cooking,” I said.

I took some meat from my luggage. It was a thick cut of salted goat meat that was ready to cook like a steak. I put two skewers through the meat, cut it in half with a knife, then passed one of the skewers to Gino.

“Thank you,” he said.

He took it and immediately began cooking it on the fire.

“I don’t have any plates, but there’s bread. We can make sandwiches once they’re cooked.”

“That sounds great. I haven’t eaten bread in some time.”

Has he been living on whatever wild game he can catch the whole time? What a primitive lifestyle.

His clothes were dirty, unsurprisingly, but they weren’t covered in spatters of

animal blood. The fine tailoring was still evident beneath the dirt. Something didn't add up. He was well dressed in fine clothes, polite, and from a powerful family. So why was his way of life so uncivilized?

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but...why are you traveling like this? Are you trying to conserve money?" I asked.

Although I didn't know much about the Toga family, I found it hard to believe that someone from a chieftain family would have to go through such extremes. Even if his family had been brought to ruin, he should've had enough fine things to sell, or a relative he could rely upon, so that he could afford to travel in comfort.

"As I'm sure you've guessed, I'm one of this kingdom's knights."

Gino repeatedly rotated the piece of meat while gripping the skewer with an old rag.

"I'm what you might call a dropout. Also, all of the local inns are full with refugees. There's a shortage of food too."

I didn't understand what his status as a dropout had to do with the large number of refugees around. Though I did understand that the inns would be full, and that small villages would be so overwhelmed with people that their stores of food likely wouldn't last them through the winter. I'd had to pay a steep price for my own food.

"If I stay at an inn, that's one less bed and one less meal for the refugees. I might be a dropout, but I'm still a knight of sorts. It was my failure to carry out my duties that drove the refugees to their current situation, and I'd hate to add to their burdens. That's why I'm traveling this way."

That's a little over the— No, actually, it's impressive.

"I have to give you credit," I said.

Rather than accept my praise, Gino frowned. "I'm not sure I deserve any."

"You do. You make it sound easy, but I know it isn't."

"It's nothing..."

"But why'd you decide to go through all this? You could've gotten involved in

the fighting. Or is that what you're trying to avoid?"

A knight who cared for his kingdom, or more to the point, for the kingdom's people, could serve them best through their efforts on the battlefield. I didn't think too badly of deserters, but it still didn't make sense that someone with a strong sense of duty like this man would turn his back on the war and escape to Shiyalta.

"I'm not like the other knights. I've lost my place among them. I still hold a knighthood, but I don't even have a fief."

The explanation suddenly came to me.

"Sorry. Toga Province was lost in the previous war, wasn't it?"

I'd only just remembered. Toga Province was the place that Harol's family business, Harrell Trading, had always traded with. The northern parts of the Kilhina Kingdom had been invaded in the previous war, leading to the loss of territory, and Harrell Trading had lost its business partners at the same time.

"Yes. That's correct. I'm all that remains of the Toga family."

His was a chieftain family that once commanded an army of spears, but now he was all that remained.

But I had to wonder how it came to that. Even if they'd lost the province, it would still belong to the Toga family on paper, so he should've been fighting to reclaim what was rightfully his. It seemed a little overly pessimistic for him to give up and flee.

Or perhaps not.

An army would be required in order to reclaim the territory. If the Toga family wasn't even trying, their forces must've been depleted already. That meant that the family would have to borrow an army from somewhere, but no one was simply going to provide one for free.

Though others might've eventually agreed to dispatch their armies to reclaim the land, the Toga family's territory would've then been split up and assigned to other chieftains or seized by the royal family. There'd be objections to the idea of returning a province to a family who'd failed to defend it. The Toga family

would be ruined, and their province lost.

Besides, he might've even realized that there was little sense in working to reestablish his territory when the Kilhina Kingdom was on the path to defeat anyway.

However hard Gino might've fought up until now, he had every reason to give up.

To make matters worse, territory claimed by the crusaders was always thoroughly pillaged, and a scorched-earth strategy was employed to ensure the kingdom's borders would be forever changed. With every last village burned to the ground, reclaimed territories would have to be rebuilt from scratch.

"Then you hold the title lord-supreme," I said. "Forgive my rudeness, sir."

Lord-supreme was a title given to the head of a chieftain family. Rook was one such example.

"No, I've relinquished my title. I'm not even a lord-knight."

The title of lord-knight wasn't equivalent to a knighthood, but any knight would obtain it along with their salary the moment they joined an order of knights serving under a chieftain, even if they'd held no fief. If he lacked even that title despite owning a knight medal, it meant that he held a knighthood but wasn't actively employed as one.

"Hm... I suppose I can speak freely in that case."

"Yes, please do."

That made it easier for me to relax.

"You might've left your service, but what about the knights that served under the Toga family?"

Were they literally wiped out?

"Every order was officially disbanded. Our forces were left in disarray by the battle to the south, and we failed to reclaim the lost territory... I doubt they could've gone on fighting any longer."

The battle to the south most likely meant the battle fought near Verdun

Fortress prior to Gok's death. After heavy fighting, the routed Kilhinan forces were focused on gathering all soldiers still capable of fighting in Verdun Fortress. They were then besieged, but the enemy hadn't dedicated all its resources to encircling the fortress. By the time the enemy's leadership had collapsed, some of the enemy forces were in the north where they were claiming northwestern territory.

If the Toga family's knights had won a more decisive victory, they could've reclaimed the land and defended it from the enemy detachment. Clearly, that hadn't happened.

"So did your remaining knights request to join orders belonging to other families instead?" I asked.

Gino answered in a sorrowful tone. "That's correct. The family's income had fallen so low that we could no longer care for them. Some said they would continue to serve without pay, but I sent them away."

Knights who respected their lord so greatly that they'd continue to wield their spears without pay was the greatest asset a chieftain family could have. It must've broken his heart to let them go.

"If only I could've assigned them all to the royal guard. I'd have *far* more faith in men of that caliber than in the guards currently defending the royal capital."

Although no chieftain would ever put their own forces in the service of another chieftain, there'd be nothing wrong with assigning one's knights to the royal guard. Then again, even that wasn't without problems—the offer might've been rejected given the disruption it might've caused to the royal guard.

"I'm just a useless man who failed to defend his province. The royal family wouldn't have wanted help from me."

"Oh, I think they might have."

"Really?"

It was hard to say. I couldn't truly assess someone's value on the battlefield based on a short conversation.

I decided to question him a little more. "What's your opinion on the

upcoming war?”

“My opinion?”

“Well, for example—do you think we’ll win or lose?”

I’ve got to admit, that was a vague question.

“I don’t hold much hope.”

Not much hope? Then he agrees with Liao Rube.

“Why not?”

“The enemy is probably in possession of twice as many guns as last time.”

The Shanish word for “gun” was written using characters that meant “fire” and “arrow.” These “fire arrows” were actually primitive muskets used by the Kulati.

“Those guns are a lot more trouble than mechanical bows,” he added.

By “mechanical bows,” he meant crossbows. They’d been around a lot longer than guns, so they also existed in the Shanti kingdoms.

“Being hit with a shot from a gun often isn’t fatal, but when shots come flying in from afar, it can unnerve the soldiers and diminish morale. The real problem is the noise they make.”

“I can imagine,” I replied.

The reason guns were so feared on the battlefield was the sound.

Front-loaded, smooth-barrel guns took so long to reload that they weren’t a great threat. The bullets were obviously powerful, and the weapon was superior to many others, but sustained fire was difficult, and bows were often the better option in terms of range and firing rate.

But none of that reassured a soldier on the battlefield when they heard the explosion of gunpowder, saw the rising plumes of smoke, and witnessed the hole torn through the body of the soldier standing by their side.

A commander might try to reassure the soldiers: “I know a few of you just died, but don’t be afraid. Only a few of your fellow men were torn apart when you heard that noise. It didn’t actually kill that many of you. It’s just loud, that’s

all.” Naturally, however, such words would ring hollow in the face of the horror unfolding on the battlefield.

The result was that a unit of gunners that would otherwise be easily crushed might go unopposed as they charged in, and an overall sense that the battle was being lost would spread.

“You look quite young. Do you have any experience in battle?” I asked.

Gino appeared so youthful that even after adding a few years to account for the slow aging of Shanti people, I estimated that he was only about twenty-five.

The battle where my uncle Gok died had taken place ten years ago, so the numbers didn’t add up... Unless soldiers here in Kilhina were sent into battle before they’d reached the age of twenty.

“Yes. My father was left bedridden after being wounded in battle ten years ago, then he died five years later. Since then, I’ve assumed his role and led knights into repeated battles to reclaim old territory. I’m ashamed to say that I have little to show for those efforts.”

“Oh, I see.”

For the past ten years, the Shiyalta Kingdom had been unaffected by war, but the same couldn’t be said for Kilhina because the enemy was stationed right on the nation’s border. Battles had always been taking place, and Gino had been taking part in them.

I could guess that he’d emptied his purse over the course of those efforts. What assets his family had left had probably been sold off to pay for soldiers.

“If you’ve got actual combat experience, perhaps you can tell me which tactics work best when facing guns?”

“Ditches and surprise attacks,” he replied without hesitation.

“Ditches?”

“Digging into the dirt to make ditches right there in our own camp.”

As I’d guessed, he was describing trench warfare.

“The problem with guns is that shields don’t work against them,” he

explained. “Unlike arrows, the shots can punch right through any lightweight shield made of wood. A thick iron plate might stop them, but putting those up in front of an army isn’t realistic.”

I definitely agreed with that. Foot soldiers were slow enough already; heavy iron plates would slow them to a snail’s pace. Plus, iron was far too expensive in any case.

It was possible to push forward while carrying thick wooden shields or logs joined together to make barricades, but it wouldn’t work well in practice—not unless the unit was entirely made up of warriors with herculean strength.

“But we can dig holes and take cover in them. One weakness of guns is that the shots only travel in straight lines.”

“But you can’t attack from inside a hole. And—”

“And we’d be flanked?” he said before I could.

“Yeah.”

A loss of maneuverability often created a risk of being surrounded. If the soldiers then became fully encircled on the battlefield, that would be a disaster from a strategic viewpoint. The unit would be completely isolated, and the soldiers thrown into panic when they realized they had no means of escape.

In addition, when one circle was drawn inside another, the outer circle covered a greater area than the other inside it. In other words, the encircled forces would have a smaller front. That made a big difference in battle. Even if one’s forces outnumbered the enemy and comprised better trained soldiers, the enemy might have five thousand soldiers fighting at the front while one’s own crowded front only allowed for three thousand soldiers to fight at a time.

This created a horrible situation where the enemy would fight against just a fraction of one’s total forces, despite all of them being gathered in one place.

There were various factors that led to envelopments occurring, but the principle one was a difference in maneuverability. If the enemy had, say, three times the maneuverability, it wasn’t possible to prevent them from moving behind one’s own forces.

Taking cover in a hole in the ground like Gino had described was sensible, but an army that did nothing but hide under cover was easily defeated.

“We can compensate for that with plainrunners. Charging gunners with plainrunners is the only effective tactic against them,” he continued.

“Hmm.”

The use of cavalry either to envelop an enemy or to prevent the enemy from doing the same had been a fundamental tactic since ancient times.

“But we can’t use that tactic when we’re advancing. If the enemy were to draw back, we’d be too far from our ditches. If only we had more experience with these tactics...”

Since Gino was fighting to regain his lost territory, he was mounting an attack, but Shanti people hadn’t fought many offensive battles in recent years.

“Have you tried sharing these ideas with your queen?”

“Before I left Reforme, the kingdom’s chieftains, Her Majesty the Queen, and His Majesty the Prince Consort had all been gathered together. I’d suggested they use these tactics, but the idea wasn’t well received. I suppose that’s only natural, though.”

Yeah, it is.

The Toga family was the loser among the chieftains. When the family’s inexperienced young head attended the meeting only to propose radical new tactics, he was bound to be laughed at.

“I think it’s a reasonable approach, myself.”

“You do?”

“But when an army is made up of separate orders of knights, it’s not enough to suggest ideas like that. They’ll always stick to using commonplace tactics.”

If it had been just one person at the top, all of the authority would’ve been concentrated in one place, and only that person would’ve needed convincing. Though it might’ve been difficult, it wouldn’t have been impossible. Kilhinan armies, much like Shiyaltan armies, were made up of multiple smaller armies brought together by a chieftain, however. The person at the top was more like

an overseer than a dictator or supreme commander.

With five or six people at the top, getting them all to agree to use some radical new tactic was a nonstarter. The minute someone agreed, someone else would oppose, preventing any productive discussion.

When the leadership was a mixture of geniuses, fools, and average minds, the only strategies or tactics that would get everyone to agree were those that were already commonplace.

“Yes, indeed. In the end, I couldn’t get anyone to listen to me.”

“It’s not a total waste. If you made an impression on someone, it might’ve sown the seeds for something that comes later.”

“That’s possible...”

“I suppose it’s not much consolation now.”

“Actually, you’ve made me feel better.”

“Really?”

As I spoke, I took bread from my bag and cut into it with a knife. This made an opening we could put the meat in.

Gino’s piece of meat was well cooked enough already, so I passed him some bread.

“Thank you.”

He immediately put the meat into the bread, pulled out the skewer, and took a big bite. His hunger was evident from the way he chewed and savored the food. It looked like he was enjoying it.

“If you’d like to serve the Ho family, I can write you a letter of recommendation.”

“Hmpfrgh?!” Gino almost choked.

“It’ll ultimately be a decision for the head of family, but I can make sure he grants you an interview at least.”

I didn’t mention that the head was my own father.

“That’s... You’re too kind. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“All right. I’ll write it after we’ve eaten.”

I wrote a simple letter of recommendation for him shortly after.

Gino was there to bid me farewell as I left the forest and took to the sky the next day.



It was April 9 and I’d finally reached the sky above the Kilhina Kingdom’s royal capital of Reforme.

Their royal capital was an impressive fortress city. Unlike Sibiak, it was completely surrounded by a wall, save for one side where a port faced out onto the sea.

The buildings were closely packed together within the walls, but it was rather small compared to Sibiak, which spread out haphazardly with no walls to constrain it. Having grown so used to Sibiak, this city—with all its tall buildings and lack of greenery—looked cramped by comparison.

Once I’d identified what I considered the most important points of the city, I took Stardust down onto a clear patch of land close to the royal castle.

“Phew.”

With a series of pops, I unfastened the belts securing me and climbed down from Stardust’s back. First, I’d need to find a place where I could leave him. Since I’d never been here before, though, I didn’t know where to go.

It turned out I didn’t have a chance to go anywhere before someone came running over.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!”

He was middle-aged; probably a knight.

Explaining my reason for being here would be a pain, but I didn’t have any other choice.

“This is no place to land an eagle!”

Ah, that’s why he’s mad. But I could’ve sworn this was a landing area when I

was looking at it from above.

“It isn’t? Forgive me. I’m a Knight Academy student from the Shiyalta Kingdom, and this is my first time in Reforme. I’m not sure of the rules.”

He knitted his brow. “A Knight Academy student?”

“Would it be possible to leave this eagle in one of your cages?”

“We’re at war. We don’t have space in our cages for every student who comes here to sightsee.”

That was a definite no. Perhaps I hadn’t chosen the right words.

“I’m here in an official capacity to carry out a special assignment. I’m not a sightseer.”

“I won’t have it. Tether your bird outside the walls.”

What’s his problem? I can’t be bothered with this.

“Please read this,” I said as I took a piece of paper from my pocket.

“Hm?”

“Just read it, please.”

The man took the paper and cast his eyes over it.

When he finished reading he said, “Well, I don’t understand the situation, but if you’re an envoy of Her Majesty Queen of Shiyalta, I can’t turn you away.”

I’d just given him the same type of official identification that was generally given to Shiyalta’s envoys and ambassadors. It was a little like a passport. It basically asked the party to treat the holder with special courtesy in the queen’s name.

It wasn’t the sort of thing someone my age would generally carry around, and they weren’t given out without a good reason, so it was no wonder that the man before me was taken by surprise.

“If you’re here to meet with Her Majesty, then I suppose you can use the royal forces’ bird cages.”

My guess was that the royal forces were roughly equivalent to the first order

of the royal guard in Shiyalta. If I was their queen's guest, then putting me in the care of the royal forces made sense.

I didn't argue. I didn't want to cause more trouble after landing in completely the wrong place.

"Very well. If you're not too busy, perhaps you could show me the way?"

"All right then."

He frowned, but then began leading me there. I followed after him while pulling Stardust along by his reins.

We'd walked quite a long distance before we finally reached the cages.

"What can I help you with?" a friendly bird keeper wearing something resembling overalls asked.

His clothes were baggier than anything people normally wore. It would protect the everyday clothes he wore underneath while he carried out dirty work.

"I'm here on official business from Shiyalta. I'd like you to take care of my eagle for one night."

"Very well. Any bad habits I should be aware of?"

He obviously meant Stardust's habits. If an eagle had a tendency to peck at people, for example, anyone working near it would have to wear a helmet.

"No bad habits at all. He's a well-trained bird."

"Hm. Then I'll gladly take him off your hands."

"Thank you."

I handed the reins to the bird keeper. He quickly set about removing Stardust's saddle.

"Hey, kid," a voice behind me called out.

I turned to see a man of about thirty standing beside my begrudging guide. He was handsome, with hair that reached down to his shoulders and clothing that looked like military attire with gold thread. It was probably a custom-made uniform. It looked a little eccentric, so I had to assume it was made to suit his

own preferences rather than some official dress code.

“Do you mean me?” I pointed to myself.

“That’s right.”

It’d been quite a while since I was last called “kid.” In fact, the last time was probably when I’d saved Carol shortly after starting at the academy.

“Can I help you with something?”

I had the feeling I’d done something to annoy him.

“Yeah. My eagle got injured just the other day. I need a new one.”

“I see.”

I had a really bad feeling about this.

“Lend me yours, would you?”

This exchange felt perfectly casual. Something on the level of, “My stomach hurts.” “That sucks.” “Gonna go to the toilet.”

He’s got to be kidding.

“I can’t do that.”

What kind of idiot thinks they can borrow an eagle from someone they’d just met?

“Hmph...” the man rubbed his smooth, perfectly hairless chin. “I didn’t say I wanted it for free, did I? I’ll compensate you.”

Seriously, how stupid is he? He has to be as dumb as Dolla, but in a whole different way.

“Regardless of how much you’d pay, it’s simply not possible. This eagle is like a brother who grew up alongside me. I’m afraid he’s not for sale.”

“Listen, kid, our kingdom’s about to go to war. You’re too young to fight at the front, aren’t you? I’m telling you knights in an allied nation need eagles for the war, and we need them *now*. If you ask yourself what’s more important, you’ll hand that bird over without a second thought.”

This guy definitely has a screw loose. He’s taking advantage of the situation in

whatever way best suits himself.

“I’m afraid that’s got nothing to do with me. I was dispatched by Her Majesty of Shiyalta. I warn you that any dispute between us could damage the friendship between our two kingdoms.”

“If you care about keeping our kingdoms friendly, you’ll shut up and hand over the eagle!”

You know, Shiyalta’s not the one that’s going to suffer if relations break down. You guys need us. Whatever. I’ll just ignore this guy... But what if he waits until I’ve left my eagle here, then comes back to claim it for himself?

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“You need to show some respect, kid. I’ve already said I’ll pay you fairly.”

This conversation’s getting into a loop. It’s him who needs to show some respect.

“If you’ve got money, go buy a bird someplace else.”

“There’s a war going on. You think there’re eagles to spare?”

What? They don’t have any in reserve?

He’d just mentioned that he’d injured his. If his order couldn’t get hold of any, it might’ve been because they didn’t know how to treat them.

I didn’t know which order of knights this man belonged to, or how high ranking he was, but that didn’t matter to me.

“No means no. Please listen to what I’m telling you.”

“You’re the one who needs to listen, brat. You don’t seem to know where you are.”

I’ve had enough of this. Is he trying to wear me down?

“You’re a stubborn one. I won’t change my mind, so stop asking.”

“Just hand it over!”

He began to approach.

The reins were still in the hands of the startled bird keeper. I knew the man

was about to snatch them away.

I kicked forward, with my weight behind my foot, and hit him around his navel.

“Guh!”

I’d kicked him over, causing him to fall on his back.

“He’s just a kid. We can take him.”

Others who’d been watching from a short distance were now reaching for their weapons.

The man I’d kicked got to his feet in a rage. “You little shit!”

Hey, you’re the one who started this. I’m the victim here.

“Grab him!” he yelled while looking at the other men around us, then drew his dagger.

I was surrounded. They were about to take me prisoner.

I’ve had just about as much as I can take. What’s wrong with this kingdom?!

“Listen up! You have no idea who I am!” I yelled in rage.

It was so loud that they all stopped in surprise.

“My name is Yuri Ho, eldest son of the Ho family! A chieftain family of the Shiyalta Kingdom! Have the knights of Kilhina forgotten their debt to my family?!”

I glared at the men one by one as I yelled. They were stunned into silence.

“I can tolerate being talked down to as ‘kid,’ but an eagle is like a knight’s own soul! How dare you try to take him!”

I drew my dagger, then I walked toward the man and pointed it at him.

“If you want my bird so badly, then let’s fight for him right here, for all to see! That’s clearly what you wanted when you drew your weapon first!”

He’d probably drawn his weapon because he’d been confident that the other knights around us would all close in and hold me down. He hadn’t expected it to turn into a duel between us.

“Grr...”

“Well? Ready yourself!”

The man slowly lowered his dagger.

“What’s wrong?! Coward!”

He tsked, but looked ashamed.

“If you don’t have the courage to fight, get out of my sight.” I waved him away like an irritating bug.

The man gave another tsk.

Is that a habit of his?

“Damn brat... I’ll remember this.” He turned his back and walked away.

“Hey, you,” I said to the man beside him who’d guided me here. “Tell me that man’s name.”

“Ah... Um...” He hesitated.

I’ve had it with this lot.

“Any man here, no matter how trivial their role, should have a name that you can give me. Or perhaps he’s so despicable that you wouldn’t dare say his name out loud?”

“N-No... Not at all.”

“Then you can tell me. Out with it.”

“He was...Jaco Yoda of the royal guard.”

Jaco Yoda. I’ll remember the name.



After I’d spent some time gathering information from the bird keeper, who was putting away my eagle, someone came running toward me from the direction of the royal castle.

“Haah... Haah... Please pardon my interruption. Are you Lord Yuri Ho?”

“That’s right.”

He appeared to be a government employee. He was rather scrawny, so I could only assume he'd graduated from a cultural academy and was now serving at the royal castle. The boys who lived in Blue Cat Dormitory of Shiyalta's Cultural Academy often took up that sort of work after graduating.

"Please allow me to guide you to the royal castle."

Someone there must've wanted to see me.

I bowed to him politely. "I'd much appreciate it."

Someone must've sent word to the castle after the scuffle a few moments ago. I felt a little bad. There was really no need for anyone to tire themselves out by sprinting to me.

"You'll have to excuse me," I said to the bird keeper who I'd just been talking to.

"Yes, sir. I'll take good care of your eagle."

I waved goodbye to him and followed the messenger from the castle. It was a slow walk with my luggage in hand, though it wasn't too much. I could only carry as much as Stardust could comfortably carry, after all.

We entered the castle.

Reforme's royal castle was quite calm compared to the bustling activity I'd seen outside. Although there were busy people inside too, it wasn't quite as chaotic as it had been outside. It looked like supplies were being carried into the building in preparation for a siege.

"This way, please," my guide said as he showed me into a high-class guest room.

The reason I'd come to Reforme was because I needed to see the geography surrounding the royal capital. I'd only landed in the city hoping to find a place to leave Stardust. I hadn't expected to be given a grand room like this—I thought I'd have to find an inn somewhere near the castle.

But there was no point in stubbornly declining their hospitality. That would just be rude.

"About dinner..." I began.

“Dinner will, of course, be provided to you here.”

I’d been about to tell him that I’d be getting something to eat in the city, but they obviously weren’t going to give me a fancy room like this without preparing a meal for me. Now I’d be missing out on whatever info I might’ve been able to gather at a tavern.

“Might I show you to the bath and offer you a change of clothes before then?”

I’d guessed he’d offer those things too. It had been five days since I’d last bathed, and it felt awful. I’d washed myself—along with my underwear—well enough in streams to avoid looking like a vagrant, but I certainly could’ve been cleaner. The same could definitely be said for my clothes, which I hadn’t been able to wash at all.

My guide probably would’ve liked to tell me I couldn’t sit on the bed or sofa until I’d freshened myself up.

“I’ll gratefully accept. Please do.”

I bowed my head. It would’ve felt wrong to keep these dirty clothes on in this fine room anyway.

“Then please allow me to guide you there now.”

I was led to a bath that was probably reserved for the generals. I could tell just from the separate changing area that this bath was too clean to be used regularly by low-ranking soldiers.

My guide left me after picking up the clothing I’d just removed.

I stepped into the bathing area completely naked.

The steam-filled bathroom contained a bath that was just as big as the one in the academy dormitory. There was a cast metal block in one corner of the bath that served as a heating element when a fire was lit beneath it.

The block was a multi-layered structure made of multiple plates and columns that the water could flow between to improve heat transfer efficiency. They were generally made from metals like iron or copper, though copper ones were superior because of their higher thermal conductivity.

The block in the dorm's bath was made of iron, which meant it didn't get as hot. Every night, the students would play a ridiculous game of chicken, where two boys sat with their backs to the block until their butts got hot. Whoever couldn't stand the heat and stood up first was the loser.

I used a bucket by the bath to pour water over myself before entering.

"Phew." A took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the hot, wet air.

That's good stuff. It's heating me down to my bones.

I didn't actually mind living outdoors like a penniless vagrant, but a hot bath was a luxury I was glad to have back.

After five minutes spent soaking in the bath, I felt I'd been warmed to my core.

"Hey," a voice from across the clouds of steam called out.

I'd noticed someone else here when I first arrived, but I didn't think they'd talk to me.

"Hello." I kept my greeting brief; I wasn't hoping to make friends.

"You're Yuri Ho, I'm guessing."

How's he know my name? Should I be worried?

"I am..."

"I heard one of my soldiers was rude to you."

Word had traveled fast. It hadn't even been an hour since our little argument.

"Please don't worry about it," I said.

As long as he doesn't take Stardust, it's fine.

"The reports said he offended you greatly. You're not angry?"

Reports? Is this guy that moron's superior officer?

He had to have been waiting for me here in the bathroom after a maid or someone gave him the news. The question was, why?

Then again, this development shouldn't have been too surprising given that the messenger who had brought me here had come from the direction of the

castle.

“He was so insistent that I thought he wouldn’t back down unless I showed anger,” I explained. “There are always people waiting to take advantage of those who appear mild-mannered.”

“Heh heh... You’re a tough one.”

He laughed, so I assumed he wasn’t annoyed with me. It probably hadn’t been the first time that soldier had caused trouble.

“I’ll admit that it did displease me. I wouldn’t go so far as to say I was enraged, but yes, I was angry. Regardless, I’m sure I’ll have forgotten about it after a good night’s sleep. Please don’t feel the need to placate me in the meantime.”

The anger I’d shown *had* been partly an act. Besides, I wasn’t a monarch, a member of royalty, or even anyone important enough that the man’s superior should feel the need to rush to the bathroom to apologize to me.

“I can’t just do nothing. The kingdom has a reputation to maintain. Whether or not you want an apology, you’ll have to gratefully accept some sort of gesture from me. That’s just diplomacy.”

Sounds like a hassle to me. I understood the need to keep up appearances, but I didn’t want anything from him.

“The soldier did have a point,” I said.

“Oh?”

The man waited for me to explain.

“I realize that a youngster who arrives to observe the war is an unwanted nuisance. All the more so when I’m asking others for assistance. It’s shameful behavior for a knight.”

This was the tactful thing to say.

“Hm... I see.”

“Whatever you intend to offer me, I’ll gratefully accept it when we’re celebrating our victory in this war.”

I likely wouldn't have been able to carry back whatever he was planning to give me on Stardust anyway. I could try to mail it home, but it would get caught in the jam of refugees. There'd be people willing to transport it for a fee, but I hated the idea of contributing to all the traffic heading into Shiyalta.

"Will you at least accept my invitation to dinner?"

Huh? Why would he... Since when do people dine with the superiors of soldiers who'd wronged them? Well, it's not too far-fetched I guess.

"It's a kind offer, but you don't need to worry about me."

I'd already been invited to dinner here at the castle.

"But Yuri, it's in our own interests to gain your favor."

What? What's he talking about?

"You don't want to be a nuisance; you don't want to cause trouble. That's your thinking, isn't it? But you're looking at it the wrong way. We've shown an incredible amount of ingratitude toward the nephew of Sir Gok. If you were to simply fly off with things as they stand, we'd have no means of making that right. When the coming reinforcements from Shiyalta hear the news, they'll hardly want to risk their lives for such ingrates. Though you personally might not see it that way, there certainly will be some who do."

Okay, he has a point there.

"That'd be a major blow to us," he continued. "But it won't be that way if we apologize to you, express our gratitude, and show you hospitality. That's why this also benefits us."

It seemed I'd been the one who'd been lacking in consideration.

"I understand. If that's the case..."

I wanted to refuse, but there was no getting out of it. Everything he'd just said was the truth. As much as I hated to be fussed over, I'd caused this problem myself, and I shared responsibility for setting it right. If I was going to lead my own unit, I'd have to get this situation straightened out first.

"I'll have to inform the castle's staff that I won't be dining here. And I'm not familiar with Reforme. Perhaps you know somewhere we can go?"

“What...? Ha ha ha!” He burst out laughing for some reason.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Heh heh... No, nothing wrong. I didn’t introduce myself, did I?”

“No...”

Who is this? I get that he has to be a high-ranking noble, but...

“My wife is the queen of this kingdom.”

“Huh?”

If he’s her husband...that makes him the prince consort.

“You can simply wait in your room. A messenger will come to call you later. This is my home, after all.”

Ah... I guess it is. So I was talking to the prince consort all along.

I’d forgotten that Kilhina had a prince consort. I’d never met one before—Carol’s dad had died at a young age—much less been invited to dinner by one.

It seemed that wherever I went, I found myself dining with royalty.

I returned to my room and changed into the fresh clothes a maid had brought to me, then I was guided to a place deep inside the castle.

This castle, much like the one in Sibiak, was divided into an area for business and a private area. We crossed from one to the other by going through a towering door, attended to by a solitary guard.

We soon reached a room where three people were waiting.

The first was the mature man I’d met in the bath, and he was with a woman of about the same age. In truth, she looked so youthful that calling her mature didn’t quite feel right. She was only the fourth blonde, blue-eyed woman I’d ever seen. The other girl was the fifth. I soon realized that she was the daughter born to the woman and the prince consort, given their faces bore a strong resemblance.

The princess looked a little younger than me. Unlike Carol, she continued to look down and didn’t try to meet my eye. I sensed she was shy, and that my presence made her nervous. I’d never known a blonde girl like her because

Queen Shimoné's daughters were both so strong-willed.

Though I was calling them the fourth and the fifth blondes in my mind, I recalled the name of Her Majesty and her daughter with a little thought. They were Queen Jacoba and Princess Tellur.

"It's an honor to make your acquaintance," I said after I'd entered the room.

I didn't have to kneel before the queen in this situation; I could behave like those regularly in her presence. Although it was our first meeting, the family had invited me here, and this was a casual dinner rather than a meeting in the throne room. Kneeling wouldn't have been appropriate. I felt confident I wasn't being rude.

Thinking back, the way I'd greeted Queen Shimoné on our first meeting had been rather over-the-top. Still, though I wasn't kneeling, I made sure my words were polite.

"I'm Yuri of the Ho family. Being invited to dine here today is the greatest honor."

"Be at ease," Queen Jacoba told me.

I cut my self-introduction short.

The queen then gestured to the seat opposite her using her open palm.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

I pulled out the chair, then sat down.

With the greetings over, I took another look around the room and realized it was actually quite small. It didn't feel like a dining hall. The round table we were sitting at was only big enough for the four of us. There were fine paintings decorating the papered walls and a small chandelier holding multiple candles hanging from the ceiling.

If this was just their private dining space, and they had a separate place for entertaining large groups, then it was large enough.

"I'll spare you a self-introduction," the prince consort said. "I'm sure my wife doesn't need any introduction either. The girl sitting to your left is our daughter. Go on and introduce yourself," he urged Tellur.

“Um, I...” She was so quiet I could barely hear her.

Hmm. So she's as shy as I thought. She's nothing like the girls in Shiyalta's royal family.

I decided to help her out. “If I’m not mistaken, you’re Princess Tellur,” I said with a smile.

I used to feel uncomfortable making friendly conversation with someone I’d just met too, so I knew how she felt.

“Y-Yes...”

“Your knowledge is impressive,” Queen Jacoba remarked.

“It’s essential to know such things. Her Highness is the future Queen of the Kilhina Kingdom, after all.”

“Yes, she... Actually, I owe you an apology before we discuss anything. A member of our royal guard was incredibly rude to you.”

Ah, that's right. That's why we're here.

Given that this was the whole reason they’d invited me to dinner, it wouldn’t be enough for them to casually say sorry after we were done eating.

Though I did get the sense that this queen was a little stiff. She wasn’t quite so calm as Queen Shimoné. It was possible that Carol would be like her when she grew up.

“As I’ve explained to His Majesty already, it didn’t bother me. We may have caused quite a scene, but there was no harm done.”

“Truly? That’s a great relief for this kingdom if so.”

Yeah, we did come pretty close to causing a diplomatic incident...

Given that I was born into a powerful family, the outcome could’ve been far worse. Our kingdoms couldn’t afford a diplomatic breakdown, so this had been the sensible way to handle it.

“I’m the one who should be expressing my gratitude. Students who come to observe the battles with no intention of taking up spears themselves can only be a burden on your kingdom. If you’re able to tolerate such behavior, Your

Majesty, then I must say I'm grateful for your magnanimity. I certainly have no cause for displeasure at my treatment here."

I figured it was wise to slip in a mention of our observation unit. I probably wouldn't need to say anything more about the unit now. Well, not that I planned to visit Reforme again with the observation unit. We'd be avoiding this place. We wouldn't be in the kingdom to sightsee, and we didn't want to get in the way of the real army. The nature of the operation meant that we'd be taking a route that kept us away from the soldiers doing the fighting. Ideally, we'd witness a battle from a distance, then leave.

Given that my own queen was spending a lot of money to dispatch reinforcements, I might not have needed to tiptoe around everyone. That wasn't my way of thinking, though. We'd just get in the way if we behaved like active soldiers, and we certainly wouldn't receive a warm welcome. Plus, touring the big cities like would-be heroes would just annoy people and get us into trouble.

"My view is that your unit could learn some valuable lessons that ensure our victory in the future. You needn't be apologetic."

"Indeed. I shall call on you should we ever find ourselves in need."

"Yes... For today, however, you should enjoy your meal. I instructed the cooks to make a special effort."

I'm looking forward to it.

It was hard to enjoy a meal in a situation like this... Or it would've been, if I hadn't been living on the most basic of food since I'd arrived at the kingdom. The truth was, I couldn't wait.

After an appetizer of turnips and thinly sliced red fish dashed with sauce, the main course came out.

"This is stewed reindeer," the maid said as she laid it on the table.

Some sort of sauce had been poured over the stewed meat, which was apparently reindeer. They tended to live in regions further north than Shiyalta, so I'd never eaten their meat before. It looked like a smooth, red meat, similar to venison. Then again, they *were* a type of deer, after all, so maybe it

technically was venison. At the very least, it looked no different from red deer or moose meat.

“This looks delicious. Thank you.”

When I cut off a piece with my knife and tried it, I found it quite distinct from ordinary venison. The juices had a strong—and completely unique—taste. It had been thoroughly stewed, and I could smell just a hint of alcohol remaining in the sauce. Though the meat had a strong taste, it wasn’t unpleasant. The flavorings and stewing process had eliminated any unpleasant aroma from it.

“How is it?” Her Majesty asked me.

“It’s very good,” I replied.

I should probably praise it a little more than that.

“It’s my first time eating reindeer meat, but the flavor makes me think of the uninhibited north.”

That should do it.

Even meats with a strong taste were good if the aroma could be eliminated. It gave me a special sort of satisfaction, as though this sort of nourishment had long been missing from my cultured life.

“Oh, I see. I’m glad it suits your tastes. Now back to what we were discussing earlier.”

“Yes?” I replied while lifting a small portion of meat to my mouth.

Cutting the meat into small pieces before eating it was more a matter of necessity than manners. Less time spent chewing each piece meant that I’d be able to keep the conversation going smoothly and eat between responses.

“From what you were telling me, it sounds as though you were camping in the woods as you made your way here.”

“That’s correct. It’s rather cold at this time of year.”

“I see that Ho family members are as hardy as people say,” the prince consort said.

Hardy? That’s the first time I’ve ever been called that.

“It’s nothing impressive,” I replied. “Even your average merchant is required to sleep outside from time to time.”

In fact, we’d already practiced camping at the Knight Academy because there’d inevitably be some involved when an army marched somewhere. We’d had proper tents and everything else needed for outdoor survival, so it wasn’t quite as harsh as an unplanned night spent outdoors. In any case, it would be an embarrassment if I wasn’t capable of camping outdoors despite almost being eighteen.

“Still, I’ve never heard of a highborn son of a chieftain family traveling and camping alone,” he continued.

I haven’t heard of such a thing myself either. Wait, no—not only have I heard of it, I saw it firsthand just a few days ago.

“I met a man on the road named Gino Toga. His journey was far more difficult than mine,” I said.

The couple both narrowed their eyes and, in precisely the same way, they both closed their lips with no hint of a smile.

A husband and wife cut from the same cloth.

“You met him?”

“Yes. I’d just lit a bonfire when he emerged from the trees and asked if he might share the fire with me.”

“Oh...”

They both frowned.

Ah, I’ve made it sound like Gino was causing me trouble.

Without going into too much detail, I said a few words in his defense. “It wasn’t that he couldn’t prepare a fire of his own. Sharing it meant we’d have twice as much wood to burn, so it benefited us both. Then we spent the night talking.”

“Hm... All right. I’m glad to hear he’s well.”

“He is, but he wasn’t using any inns along his journey, and he was only eating

meat that he hunted himself.”

“Oh, I see.”

They didn’t ask any further questions—they might’ve wanted to avoid this topic.

Though they were surprised to learn that I’d met Gino, they probably didn’t care about his journey south. To them, the business with Gino was over and done.

“Though it didn’t seem to be affecting his health at all,” I added. “Please don’t worry about him.”

The room fell silent. They clearly didn’t want to discuss this matter with outsiders.

“He was headed for Shiyalta. I’m sure he’ll be of service there. I wrote him a letter of recommendation to show my father, so he might even find a place serving the Ho family.”

I probably didn’t need to inform them of this, but I wanted to say it just in case. That way there’d be no misunderstandings later.

“Very well. He worked hard here. I hope that you’re able to treat him well.”

They didn’t express any objections, so now all that mattered was whether Rook took to him or not. I’d been half worried their reaction would be quite different—something along the lines of, “That won’t do, he knows too much. Return him to us as soon as you’re able... Alive or dead. Bwah ha ha!”

Fortunately, that hadn’t been the case.

“Pardon me for the interruption.”

The remains of the beautiful reindeer dish were taken away and a new dish was put down in their place.

“Trout in salt and herbs,” the maid who wheeled out the dishes on a cart said to no one in particular.

She removed the cloche to reveal a large plate with a mound of salt sitting on it. She broke into the salt, revealing the steaming food within—a large trout

cooked whole.

She then cut the fish open with a knife and began spooning out portions of the flesh onto separate plates.

I was once again impressed by the sophistication of cuisine in the Shanti kingdoms. It was impressive that they could make dishes like this—where the fish had been cooked in the salt—when they couldn't easily get hold of spices, fruits that grew near the equator, or aromatic vegetables like scallions.

The plates were given out in the clockwise direction—first to Her Majesty, then the prince consort, and then me.

The dish was placed before me.

"I still remember eating this same dish with Sir Gok," the old man said.

I looked up and saw a look of nostalgia on his face.

It made sense that they'd have served Uncle Gok dinner like this. Unlike me, he was an actual soldier fighting for Kilhina, so he was bound to get the same, or even better, treatment.

"I remember how Sir Gok looked at Tellur and said she looked just like his own daughter. I suppose Sir Gok's daughter would have to be your cousin."

I couldn't help but be curious. I looked at Tellur.

Um, she's supposed to look like Sham...? Really? I'm not so sure...

Tellur seemed to shrink with fear when she noticed me studying her. Sham wasn't exactly friendly when she met new people, but she'd never been *this* shy.

Maybe Gok assumed she was another bookworm and figured that made her like Sham?

"What's wrong?" the prince consort asked.

"Ah... I'm sorry. Yes, my cousin. She's called Sham, and we're quite close."

"Is that right? I'm sure you're aware, but I knew Sir Gok since the crusade before last... Though when I first met him, he wasn't leading his own army."

The crusade before last was the thirteenth crusade from the enemy's point of

view. That had been forty years ago. Back then, a nation known as the Dafide Kingdom, located to Kilhina's east, had been brought to its knees by the crusade and ceased to exist. I'd heard that there'd been a large influx of refugees, just like now.

Gok would've been a young man back then, but apparently he'd already joined the fighting.

"Really? I'd love to know more."

"The next time I met him, he'd become a father. 'We need to buy time for the children to grow up in peace,' was what he told me. Though I had no idea he'd do what he did..."

So that was why he did it...

It was just like he'd said. By repelling the fourteenth crusade, Gok had gifted us with ten years of peaceful life.

I owe a lot to the guy.

The consequences of failure didn't bear thinking about, but fortunately all had gone according to Gok's plan. Rook had taken over after his death, and now my family's orders of knights were being reassembled. All's well that ends well, you might say. Then again, given how risky a kingeagle strike was, I had to wonder what he'd been thinking.

"It's true that my cousin and I have been able to enjoy ten years of peaceful existence at the academy thanks to Uncle Gok. I believe he got his wish."

"Hearing that is a weight off my mind."

"If there's something I can do, I'd also like to assist the war effort. It's somewhat difficult to be of use though, given my lack of experience."

I shared my own feelings while choosing my words carefully. I didn't want the conversation to take any unexpected turns.

"You don't need to take such risks," the prince consort assured me. "Your unit will include someone of great importance. If anything happened, that would be a great source of shame for our kingdom."

The person of great importance was, of course, Carol. It was fair to say that

every member of the unit would be someone important, but Carol was far above the rest of us.

If she were to be abducted and become the enemy's prisoner, there was still the possibility of recovering her. If that were the case, the great shame he spoke of might drive the Kilhinan forces to go after her, and it would mean we'd triggered a disaster.

Although I wasn't sure he'd thought quite *that* far ahead, I knew he'd want to discourage me from taking any risks that might lead to such a situation.

"I must say, this fish is exquisite," I said, forcing a change of topic back to the food.

As nice as the meal was, gatherings like this one took a toll on me mentally.

"I owe you my sincere gratitude for the invitation to dine with you."

"Take care on your way back to your room," the queen said.

"You'll be leaving early tomorrow morning, won't you?" the prince consort added. "I'll tell the bird keepers to feed your eagle first thing."

"Thank you. That's a great help," I said, and I really meant it.

"If you'd like, I can have a hard drink brought to your room."

"I appreciate the offer, but I meant what I said about not drinking alcohol."

Does he think I might still drink in private even though I refuse it in public?

After I'd made it this far, I definitely wasn't going to drink before I hit twenty. If I drank here, the boys in the dorm would all be saying, "I knew you'd crack."

"Now, if I may be excused. Princess Tellur, thank you for your company. Good night."

I thought it best to say something to the mute girl. She simply nodded, then backed off a little without looking pleased at all.

I walked off and let someone guide me back to my room.

I would've liked to stay another night and learn more about Reforme, but I still had to find a place suitable for our base close to the border. Once I'd done

that, I could return to the academy and begin the interviews. I'd have to set out early tomorrow because there wasn't a single day to spare in my schedule.

Epilogue — Meanwhile...

Myalo Gudinveil had been writing letters that day.

She was in a room at the Knight Academy that received ample sunlight. She was sitting at a desk by the window, and Liao Rube was sitting at the opposite side and working on the same task.

This wasn't a major undertaking by any means. They were simply writing letters of refusal to students who'd applied for the expedition despite not meeting the requirements.

Myalo wrote a short piece of text on a small piece of paper, put it to one side, then picked up another piece and began writing again.

Each time, she wrote a polite passage including the student's name, dormitory name, and the requirements that they hadn't met. These applicants were probably aware that they fell short, but hoped they'd slip through if no one checked their applications carefully. Or perhaps they thought that no one would dare turn them down because their father was such a well-respected knight, and his signature was on the application.

In any case, some of these names belonged to high-ranking knight families that had previously led over a thousand soldiers into Kilhina. Myalo wanted to reduce the risk of these students causing trouble when they were left behind with a lot of time on their hands.

"Phew... How about we take a break, Myalo?"

"Yes, we should."

Myalo put down her quill. The work was beginning to tire her mentally.

Her quill had stopped writing smoothly—a result of the pressure she had put on it while writing—so she picked up her knife to sharpen it.

"I'll do it," Liao said.

He was offering to sharpen the quill's tip.

“I don’t mind doing it myself,” she replied.

“I will. It’s not like I’m being much use otherwise. You can rest.”

There was no denying that the pile of letters sitting beside Liao was only about half the size of Myalo’s. It was partly because she was a quick writer, but also because Liao couldn’t stand the sort of monotonous task in front of them.

“In that case, please do.” Myalo passed him the quill.

Liao used his own knife to sharpen it. He was so skilled with the tool that there was no chance of him cutting himself.

“It’s important to get the right person for the job. This kind of work isn’t for me.” Liao was aware of his own shortcomings.

“I’m afraid most of the tasks you’ll perform as head of the Rube family will resemble this one.”

“I’ll get someone else to do it all.”

“That’s certainly an option if there’s an individual you trust with such matters. The problem is that people given such responsibilities tend to engage in corruption and embezzlement.”

“I’m not kidding around. My wife’s not gonna be the type to do anything like that.”

His wife? That’s an unexpected turn.

“Yuri’s family has someone named Satsuki, right? Gok’s widow.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Myalo understood what Liao was saying and secretly felt a little impressed. He seemed to know what was going on in the world around him. There were actually very few people who could interpret what went on in society and learn lessons from it.

“I heard they gave her the family seal and let her manage the whole territory since Sir Gok’s death. I’ve never met her, but she must know what she’s doing. That’s why she knew how to make sure Sir Gok’s will was followed to the letter. She protected the Ho family’s future. If you ask me, a woman like that’s the

ideal wife for a lord-supreme.”

“Yes, I think you might be right,” Myalo replied, though she only half agreed.

In some families, things really *did* go that smoothly. But she couldn’t imagine any hero making it his goal in life to find a wife with a talent for governance. Part of her didn’t approve of his thinking.

“My mom’s completely hopeless when it comes to that stuff,” Liao continued. “Though my dad was the one who took *her* name, so he couldn’t complain. Me, I’d rather marry someone smart than someone powerful.”

Liao Rube’s father, Kien Rube, wasn’t a born heir to the Rube family. The previous generation of the Rubes had lacked any sons, so succession had occurred via a daughter. Kien Rube was the first-cousin once removed of the family’s eldest daughter, whom he married. He’d been a close friend to those in the previous generation of the family since a young age.

Their family tree made it appear that the Rube daughter had married someone from her parents’ generation, but in reality, he wasn’t anywhere near the same age as her parents. Still, Kien was about ten years older than his wife, which meant that his son, Liao, had been born quite late into his life.

Their family situation had meant that Kien hadn’t chosen his own wife. Liao, however, was the undisputed trueborn heir to the family headship, so he was free to marry whomever he pleased.

“Oh, I see. That’s good thinking.”

In truth, Myalo wasn’t particularly interested in Liao’s future plans. It didn’t matter to her whom he married.

“So...what about Yuri?” Liao asked.

As he changed the topic, he looked over at Myalo and studied her reaction.

Yuri and Carol were close. It was nothing more than friendship at that point, but that sort of closeness between a boy and a girl meant a lot to observers. There’d always been rumors about the pair—though the way they argued in public always seemed to contradict them.

Liao was probably trying to use this conversation to gather information under

the guise of small talk. It was plain to see; his attitude made his intentions obvious. Myalo concluded that Liao lacked the skills needed to talk people into revealing secrets.

“Well... I don’t think he’s seriously considering marriage yet,” Myalo said to keep the conversation going.

“Yeah, I haven’t heard anything about that either. There was Princess Carol’s little sister... Princess Carla? I once heard some rumors about them being in love.”

“And you believed it?” Myalo asked with some amusement.

Liao would’ve had to be an idiot to believe those rumors.

“Not really. It wouldn’t make sense for him to spend time with Princess Carol if he was dating her sister—it’d make him look unfaithful.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Indeed, if Yuri had been dating Princess Carla, Princess Carol would’ve moved rooms rather than wake up next to her sister’s lover each morning.

“But if those rumors aren’t true, then I don’t know what Yuri does with his time. He shouldn’t be busy—he has most of his credits already. Does he really spend it all on that Ho Company thing of his?”

“For the most part, yes.”

He also visited Ms. Ether’s office to study history and Kulatish and played togi from time to time. For such a rich young boy to stick to such simplistic hobbies was an impressive show of restraint. Even when he’d had a day off recently, he’d merely visited a few historic sites in the capital with Myalo.

They visited the pillar that still bore the marks caused during Aaron’s Uprising—Aaron Mulan had slashed at it in rage after hearing that reinforcements for the royalists were approaching. They also saw a shrine made by worshippers of the Sacred Pond, thought to be the oldest wooden structure in Shiyalta. Afterward, they’d visited a restaurant where they had a reservation, then they’d simply gone home.

Yuri probably hadn’t considered it a date, but Myalo had made some good

memories from it.

“I can’t wrap my head around it. If he’s not enjoying his money, then why work for it in the first place?”

“Not every man enjoys counting the number of women they’ve slept with in the taverns and whore houses.” Myalo’s tone was a little scornful—Liao Rube was well known for his profligate lifestyle.

“Hah, I guess not. But if he’s not interested in women, what’s his idea of a good time? I’ve never heard anything about him gambling, and I doubt his work is any fun.”

“Perhaps it’s beyond your understanding.”

“Why wouldn’t I understand?”

Liao looked at Myalo and smiled slightly in an attempt to appear friendly, though he was glaring at her.

“You were born heir to the Rube family. You’ve been praised for behaving like an ideal knight, and I doubt you’ve ever thought that things should be any other way. I suspect that makes it difficult for you to understand Yuri’s actions.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Yuri sees no value in connections formed through wealth or power. I’m sure that any sexual activity bought with money would feel empty to him, and he’s not interested in anyone who wants to befriend him for his title. I believe what he finds meaningful and enjoyable is forming bonds with other people.”

“Hmph... Beyond the Ho family’s connections, you mean? Yeah, I’ve never thought like that. For me, the Rube family’s supporters have always been like family too.”

“I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that. It’s normal. Yuri’s the strange one.”

“You think he’s strange? It sounds more like you think it’s a good thing.”

Liao was starting to sound argumentative. He wasn’t being aggressive or hostile, but he clearly didn’t like what he was hearing. Getting into a confrontation with him over this wouldn’t have been smart.

“He has strengths and weaknesses. Because of the way he is, Yuri gives far too little attention to public engagements and dinner parties. That’s just fine for Ho Company’s chairman, but as the Ho family’s heir, he needs to do more to strengthen his ties to other families.”

“Yeah...”

Hearing Myalo criticize Yuri a little was enough to quell Liao’s emotions.

“I think that’s enough chat,” Myalo said. “Let’s keep going. There’s only about a third of the work left.”



As Myalo was walking back to the dorm, all the paperwork dealt with, she heard Carol’s voice.

“Hey, Myalo!”

“Yes?”

“I heard you and Liao Rube were doing some work.”

“That’s right.”

Myalo tried to act calm, although she felt a little awkward at having this secret revealed.

“Why’d you leave me out?”

“We’re not leaving you out. We were only writing refusal letters in response to applications.”

“So let me get involved.”

“The thing is...” Myalo quickly thought up an excuse. “These refusal letters were criticizing people who’d applied despite not meeting the requirements. A letter like that with a princess’s signature on it would look far too serious.”

“Ngh...”

Being royalty meant that everything Carol did or said was likely to be taken out of proportion. And unlike Carla, Carol didn’t joke around. Any criticism from her was bound to weigh heavily on the recipient’s mind.

Or at least, that was Myalo's excuse.

Myalo could see it being a genuine issue, but the *real* reason Carol had been excluded was because a student from a high-ranking knight family had been recommended by Liao Rube. Unfortunately, he was a little below the credits requirement. Myalo didn't want Carol to see his academy record and realize he wasn't eligible.

Yuri knew when to turn a blind eye to some minor dishonesty, but Myalo wasn't sure how Carol might've reacted. If Carol got angry, Myalo wasn't sure she could convince her to drop the issue without some help from Yuri. Carol probably wouldn't have even noticed, but Myalo thought it wise to hide everything from her just in case.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you what was happening."

"You don't have to apologize."

Myalo didn't feel good about herself when she deceived a close friend like this. At the same time, there was a part of her that recognized her ability to deceive others as an important skill.

I'm a terrible friend. A true friend would've told the truth, even if it meant making her angry and having an argument.

Despite feeling this way, Myalo couldn't change her behavior.

"I'm going back to the dormitory... Let's talk there," Myalo suggested.

"Okay."

When Myalo started walking, Carol fell in step alongside her. She seemed sluggish, like she was upset after being left out of the loop.

"Neither Yuri nor I consider you a nuisance, Your Highness, nor do we dislike having you around. It's just that there are certain tasks someone in your situation can't perform."

Myalo chose her words carefully. What she said was true. Though Yuri didn't see any special worth in this observation unit, it didn't mean he hated Carol. Yuri wasn't such a do-gooder that he'd go out of his way to take care of Carol if he didn't like her.

“But...I feel like I’m not part of the group...”

“That’s not true at all.”

Actually, there *was* truth in it. Carol was privy to a little less information than everyone else involved. It was inevitable that she’d feel excluded.

“Liar. I know you three are always whispering secrets to each other.”

“Well... Perhaps Yuri does have a tendency to underestimate you, Your Highness.”

Once again, Myalo put the blame on Yuri. It was her actual opinion, so it wasn’t a lie. Yuri saw Carol like a dangerous animal that would end up destroying itself if it got worked up over something, but Myalo held Carol in higher regard.

No matter the situation, Carol was always willing to take advice from Yuri and Myalo. Even under extreme circumstances, she wouldn’t put her hands over her ears like a spoiled child and stubbornly do her own thing. Yuri thought Carol might do exactly that if the expedition ran into trouble, but Myalo thought he was worrying too much.

“Yeah, that’s true. Just what kind of person does Yuri think I am?”

“You’re someone precious to him.”

“Precious...?” Carol blushed.



“And unlike me, you’re not content to do whatever Yuri wants from you. I’m sure he wishes he could keep you in his pocket, safe from harm.”

“But...what about Liao Rube? He won’t like following Yuri’s orders either, will he?”

“Heh. That’s a funny thing to say. Liao Rube isn’t precious to Yuri at all. Yuri doesn’t care what he does.”

Liao would have most of those loyal to the Rube family under his control, but even in an extreme case where Liao lost his temper and led them all to their deaths, it wouldn’t be Yuri’s problem. Yuri might warn Liao when he was headed into danger, but he wouldn’t try to stand in his way.

The same wasn’t true of Carol. He’d give his life to protect her, and he wouldn’t give up on her for as long as he drew breath. For Yuri, the death of someone precious to him was more frightening than dying himself.

“I’m sure he does care about Liao.”

“What about you, Your Highness?”

“What do you mean?”

“Supposing Liao was in grave danger, how far would you go to save him?”

“Well...”

In the faint light of dusk, Carol looked as though she was thoroughly considering the question.

“Don’t ask me things like that.”

“Heh. You don’t have to say it. Now, what if it was Yuri about to die? I’m sure you’d do all you could to save him without a second thought, even if it meant risking your own life. And I’d do the same.”

“Well...maybe.”

When Myalo had spoken of strengths and weaknesses with Liao earlier, those were empty words intended to placate him. She hadn’t meant what she’d said.

Those close to Yuri would always stand by him, even if he lost everything he owned or was cast out of the Ho family to live as a commoner...because they

knew Yuri would do the same for them.

Since Yuri was willing to give his life to save his friends, they were willing to do the same for him, rather than simply taking advantage of his feelings.

It wasn't like a relationship calculated to be mutually beneficial. If it was merely about that, one side would betray the other as soon as greater benefits could be found elsewhere. Their ties to Yuri were friendships born out of emotional bonds, which meant betrayal was much less likely. It was the best sort of alliance.

"That's the exact feeling of fear Yuri is carrying with him as he leads you into the war zone. You can't blame him for becoming overprotective."

"Yeah, but...I don't like being left out..."

"Let's talk this over properly at the dormitory. I believe Dolla is visiting his parents today. If you don't mind, I could stay in your room."

"Really? You're always welcome. There's a ton I want to talk about. You can have Yuri's bed."

What do girls do when they spend a night together? Myalo felt a little excited as they headed back.

Afterword

Thank you for taking interest in my work. My name is Fudeorca.

The first volume of this series was published back on April 25, 2020. That's exactly ten months before the publication of this volume.

Time goes by quickly. Something major happened back in 2020—coronavirus became widespread, which made it a turbulent year for me. I'm sure most readers can say the same.

I remember that it really got me down when a state of emergency was declared soon after the first volume had been published. It's thanks to the support of my dear readers that I've been able to make it as far as volume three. I'm forever grateful.

In the content of this volume, we finally saw celestial navigation being put into practice for the sake of trade.

I have a deep interest in the history of humanity. There couldn't have been any way for a ship to determine its position on open water before celestial navigation had been developed, and yet humans had managed to reach several tiny islands, such as Hawaii, Tahiti, Easter Island, and the Galápagos Islands.

How did people succeed in those voyages? The topic has been the subject of research, but there are no definite answers. Many of those people lacked written language, so their stories weren't passed down.

But that's not to say we have no idea at all. People have tried to recreate those voyages, alone on a traditional yacht, without using celestial navigation or GPS. These people challenged themselves by only using the sailing techniques available in the past, and actually accomplished a successful voyage between Hawaii and Tahiti.

According to these sailors, since the oceans have currents, memorizing the way they change makes it possible to determine one's current position despite the vast, identical-looking landscape. It's also important to have a feeling for

how much time has passed, how far the ship has traveled, and a good memory of how the constellations are positioned in the sky.

There's also the ocean waves. They're more turbulent closer to islands because they're reflected back when they hit land, which makes it possible to determine the position of an island by watching the waves.

Early peoples must have spotted those reflected waves during their time at sea, and then expanded the range of human habitats after going to investigate. Perhaps there were people who were tired of a monotonous life on an isolated island and tried their best to discover new land.

I've gotten sidetracked by a rather grand topic.

At any rate, another big development in this volume was the outbreak of a war.

It's a defensive war. Yuri isn't in a position to fight himself, but now he's going to go take a look. Her Majesty the Queen is in a difficult situation. She has no idea that Yuri is searching for a new continent, and she needs to take whatever pragmatic measures are available to her in response to the serious threat of invasion.

Just like policymakers throughout actual history, those in this story are liable to make mistakes. Groping for the most effective policy, then taking decisive action without knowing whether it's truly the right thing is all part of the job.

Likewise, when responding to the coronavirus pandemic, leaders around the world did what they thought was best as part of frantic efforts to protect their countries. While I can't say for certain that there weren't any politicians who did the wrong thing as a result of ill will toward their own country, I'm at least certain that such leaders were few and far between.

Let's go back to talking about this novel. The crusaders are the enemies of the Shanti nations, but I had to cut many of the long explanations about them because they were redundant. Well, although I say they were cut from the novel, those explanations aren't in the original web novel on *Shosetsuka ni Naro* either.

Anyone dedicated enough to want to know more can find the information uploaded to Shosetsuka ni Naro as a collection of reference materials titled 黄金の夜明け前 (Before the Golden Dawn). It's really, really long, but it contains some rough summaries of the history behind the world of this work.

For various reasons, I still have some remaining space for the afterword, so I'll continue with the story that I always put at the end of each one.

We're resuming from the point where my father was out running, and someone living in his car called out to him.

"He said, 'Give me a copy of today's newspaper.' I asked him why."

"Right," I replied.

"He said he really wanted to see the job listings in that day's paper, but it was around 9 p.m. already and he said the convenience stores weren't selling copies anymore. I knew there'd be one at my workplace though."

Rather than reading newspapers at home, my father read them at his workplace a short distance away.

"I should've just told him to go read it at the library tomorrow, but I couldn't say no to someone who was living out of a car at his age. I ran to my workplace and looked for the newspaper."

"That was good of you," I said, impressed by my father's good nature.

"Well, he was really grateful."

Whoops. I'm out of space once again. As much as I hate to stop here, I'll have to resume the story next time.

I hope that I'm given the opportunity to continue.

The Conqueror from
a Dying Kingdom 3





An anime-style illustration of a young woman with blonde hair tied in a ponytail with a blue bow. She has blue eyes and a gentle smile. She is wearing a dark blue jacket over a yellow shirt. She is holding the hand of a young man with reddish-brown hair who is looking down. The background is a dimly lit room with wooden walls and windows. A nameplate above Carol reads "CAROL".

CAROL

“But well done.
You played beautifully.”

YURI

Carol gave me a bold smile as
she gently presented her hand.
This time, she wasn't going to
pat me on the shoulder.

Bonus Short Stories

Sham Just Wanted to Try It

Sham Ho was facing a scolding of epic proportions that day.

“Just *what* were you thinking?” the lecturer for the manners course demanded, her brows furrowed into a deep v-shape. “Explain yourself.”

“What was I thinking...? Just that I could probably do it.”

“*Probably?! And what do you get out of it now that it worked?!*”

“Well, nothing really...”

Sham couldn’t think of anything gained by pulling a tablecloth off a table without removing all the plates on top of it first. It wasn’t going to win her a medal, and it certainly didn’t help clear the table faster.

“Then why’d you do it?”

“Just to see if I could...”

It was a simple experiment to investigate the relationship between friction and the law of inertia. When a plate was placed on a tablecloth, it created friction at the point where the two touched.

If the tablecloth were to be pulled slowly, the friction between the two would win out, causing the bottom of the plate to be pulled along with the tablecloth. But if the tablecloth was pulled with enough speed, the friction would lose to inertia, causing the plate to slide over the tablecloth.

“And you think that’s appropriate behavior for a lady?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Sham mumbled.

“It isn’t, is it?”

The question of what was appropriate behavior for a lady came up depressingly often when learning manners, but what was a lady anyway?

Yes, there were people who found the sight of a woman pulling off the tablecloth disgraceful—the lecturer talking to Sham, for example—but not everyone would think that way. Yuri wouldn't. He'd probably think it was fun and try it out himself.

I can't change myself to suit anyone who thinks some little experiment like this is a disgrace. And who cares if people think that about me anyway? I get that the whole point of the course is to learn how to avoid disgracing yourself, but I can't see why that's important in the first place.

But there was no point in arguing over it, so Sham decided to give up. "Yes, you may be right."

"Yes, I am. You need to learn that this behavior isn't acceptable."

"Yes, ma'am."

Is this really worth being angry over? It's not like I suddenly pulled off a tablecloth in the middle of class while it had plates full of snacks on it.

She'd patiently waited until the lecture was over and everyone was tidying up, then she'd tried it with only one plate on the table. She'd managed to pull it off without a hitch too. Admittedly, there was a risk the plate would've broken if it hadn't worked, but it still wasn't worth getting *this* angry over.

The lecturer could set her own rules while the class was in progress and get as angry as she wanted when rules were broken, but this had happened after the lecture.

"Are you sure you've understood? Tell me what you've learned in your own words."

Sham wanted to sigh.

"Pulling off tablecloths the way I did isn't ladylike, so I shouldn't do it in public."

Instead, I should do it when there aren't any tyrants like you watching. Sham kept that last sentence to herself, though.

"Not just in public—don't do it at home either."

"Huh?" Sham blurted out before she could stop herself.

Who cares what I do at home? Sure, if I take off my clothes here and walk around naked it'll be a breach of public morals. But that doesn't mean I can't undress to take a bath, does it? Doesn't she realize that none of what she's saying makes any sense?

"Do you have something to say?" the lecturer asked.

"No..."

She wanted to call the whole thing stupid and storm out, but she knew that wouldn't be sensible. This was a compulsory course. No matter how much of a pain it was, she had to endure it in order to graduate.

"I understand. I won't do it at home either."

She didn't like to lie, but it was possible that she'd never get the urge to do it again in her life, so it might turn out to be true.

"Very well. Now let's go to a private study room. You're going to write a letter of apology."

Did I mishear that?

"Letter of apology?"

"That's right. Come on, let's go."

After-School Togi Coaching

Myalo Gudinveil was playing togi with Carol that day.

"How's this?" Carol moved her chariot across the river and captured a spear bearer.

"Not quite."

Myalo felt a headache forming in her near future. Carol was usually smart, but the moment she looked at a togi board...

"You see how my plainrunner's threatening you here?" Myalo asked.

"Ah, yeah."

Carol put the chariot back in its original position, then returned the spear to

the board.

Carol's move would've allowed Myalo to position her plainrunner in a way that limited Carol's options. Carol would've captured one more spear before losing her chariot, meaning she would've traded a chariot for two spears—a poor exchange.

"Hmm..." Carol thought hard.

"Well, for example..." Myalo moved Carol's other chariot to cross the river at a different spot.

"Huh? But then..."

Carol was surprised. The chariot was threatened by a kingeagle the moment it crossed the river. Myalo would take it with her next move. It felt like deliberately offering the piece to her.

"Then, when I move my eagle, you'll do this, then I'll do this, and here's where we'll end up. The result is that my plainrunner ends up in another spot, allowing you to safely move your chariot across the river. Ultimately, it becomes a trade of two chariots for two spears and a royal guard."

"Hmm... I get it."

"If your opponent loses a royal guard or an imperial guard, they won't be able to defend from kingeagles. Since kingeagles are always a threat, they'll constantly have to pay attention to them. The effect goes beyond the simple value of the pieces."

Each player had a single imperial guard and royal guard on their side of the board to protect their king from diagonal attacks. They were the only pieces that could stop kingeagles.

When a kingeagle captured one of those pieces, it would then be in a position where the king could capture it in turn. That meant it wasn't a real threat. However, when any other piece captured a guard, it left the player at a real disadvantage.

"Yeah, you're right. Not a bad move."

"Okay, but let's put the pieces back."

Myalo undid the moves she'd just made.

"Shouldn't we just keep going...?"

Carol felt a little disheartened to see the board reverted.

"You can make that same move again if you'd like."

"Okay..."

Carol moved her chariot once more, intending to repeat the same sequence.

"Very well."

Myalo moved a different piece this time.

"Hey, wait..."

"Heh heh."

"No... That's the wrong piece."

"Why don't we think about it a little more?" Myalo suggested with a smile.



"Looks like we're almost finished."

There was little point in continuing now that a clear path to checkmate had presented itself.

"Hmm..." Carol muttered.

"You want to play some more?"

Carol would normally be satisfied after receiving so much coaching, but she might've been extra eager because their dormitory's qualifiers for the Academy Togi Tournament would start the next day.

"No, I'm just thinking I might struggle to become our dorm's representative."

"Oh?"

Myalo doubted her own ears. Carol couldn't possibly be clueless enough to think she had a chance of being chosen to represent their dormitory in the tournament.

"No, no, not like that. I mean if you and him weren't around."

“Ah, okay, I see...”

She means getting third place so that she'd be representative if we weren't around? Myalo still wasn't sure she understood. “Does that matter? Yuri and I are both taking part.”

“But you don't want to, do you? You know you'd make some students in White Birch mad if you played them and won.”

“Yes, that's true.”

Myalo was plotting to lose deliberately and make Yuri the dormitory representative, but if she *did* win, she might have to force herself to deliberately lose the tournament later. The whole thing was too important for the students of White Birch.

If Myalo, of all people, were to win during the first tournament she was eligible to enter, there could be untold trouble—especially given that she'd turned her back on the Cultural Academy to join the Knight Academy.

“As for Yuri,” Carol continued, “we both know he's not serious. He's not passionate about any of this. He won't want to compete.”

“Yes, you may be right.”

That's the whole reason I've had to come up with a plan to make sure I lose.

“So it's possible that the two of you will drop out. But I'm not even going to get third place...”

“Um, well...”

Frankly, Carol wasn't even an *average* player, so there wasn't much chance of her finishing third behind Myalo and Yuri. She'd have to win five out of six games, but her chances of winning each individual game would be about ten percent. There'd have to be some kind of miracle for that to happen.

“I'm not going to say it's *completely* hopeless,” Myalo replied tactfully, “but you'd need luck on your side.”

Caph and Beaule Work Overtime

Caph Ornette was returning to the Ho Company's office late that night. He came across the guard stationed by the gate and handed over an alcoholic drink.

"Thank you, sir. Here's something to help you sleep tonight," Caph said.

"Thank you, as always." The guard bowed his head and accepted it before going back into the guardroom.

Naturally, these soldiers were only tasked with guarding the Ho family residence across the street, but in practice they also guarded Ho Company's office building. It was largely thanks to their twenty-four hour surveillance that no one had ever tried to rob Ho Company. Giving them little gifts like this was far cheaper than hiring the guards they'd need otherwise.

Caph felt odd addressing them so respectfully, especially given that he never watched his words around Yuri, the son of a lord-supreme. Still, it kept the soldiers on good terms with him.

"Now, if you'll excuse me."

Caph bowed his head before walking away from the residence gate. On the other side of the street, he used his key to unlock the office door. He had to start preparing for a trade negotiation the next morning, so he was going to sleep in the break room that night.

Caph stepped into the office. There was someone else there, sitting on a chair and watching him as he came in.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Caph."

It was Yuri's cousin, Beaule Emanon.

Caph noticed that the candle, which was fixed in the far-right corner of the room, was already lit.

"You're still here?" Caph asked. "I keep telling you to leave when your shift's over."

"Sorry. I really wanted to go over these figures..."

"You'll ruin your eyes."

Caph had actually known several accountants who'd ruined their eyes through such habits. They didn't struggle to see things close up like an elderly person would, so it didn't prevent them from working. Anything even a short distance away, however, would look blurry to them. Some had even died as a result because they couldn't see carriages speeding toward them.

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

There was nothing wrong with her being passionate about her work, but it was possible to overdo it.

"You haven't had dinner, have you? Here, eat this."

Caph pulled out a big sandwich that was supposed to be his own dinner from his bag.

"Oh... I couldn't..."

"Go ahead. I've got another I was going to eat in the morning."

Caph pulled another, smaller sandwich from the bag.

"You're still growing. If you work without eating anything, it'll be bad for you. Make sure you finish that."

Caph took a bite from his smaller sandwich.

"Is it good?" Caph asked after Beaule had started eating.

She nodded in response to Caph's question while chewing on her sandwich. It was a fairly tough, long piece of bread stuffed full of leafy vegetables, cheese, and meat.

Beaule must've been hungry because she was making short work of it. It was a little big for a girl her age, but it looked like she'd polish it off no problem.

"Glad to hear it." Caph nodded.

He'd finished his sandwich quickly—an old habit he'd never managed to shake from his days as an apprentice, where he'd gotten scolded for taking too long to eat.

“Mr. Caph...”

“Hm?”

“What sort of work were you doing before you started here?” Beaule asked casually.

Beaule hadn’t been around when Ho Company was founded; she might’ve assumed that Caph had applied for a job here like any other employee.

“Before I came here...”

Getting drunk was a full-time job for me before this. But before that...

“I had my own trading business, but it failed.”

“It did...?”

In the past, one of Caph’s jobs had been carrying out schemes intended to put competitors out of business.

Cooperation could be bought from the witches for those who could afford it, but money wasn’t infinite. He’d had to use the witches’ services as effectively as possible. That meant figuring out a competitor’s weakness and using that knowledge in a plan that damaged them at minimal cost. That had been Caph’s job.

The company director would state who he needed gone, then Caph would do some research and put together a plan to show the director. If it was considered cost effective, he’d then visit the witches with a list of requests and payment.

In the process, he’d seen several people meet with misfortune while the witches and his own firm lined their pockets.

“You’re not the right type for this work, are you?”

Those were the words he remembered hearing from a young girl while he was visiting one of the seven witches together with the director.

“Your plan’s sixty percent effective and does minimum harm. You could’ve chosen a hundred-percent effective strategy, but your conscience must have stopped you since you knew it would cause some deaths. I’d recommend finding

another job unless you want to feel your pride get slowly eaten away."

Caph quit the job soon after. He started his own business, but he hadn't had any success. He'd made too many enemies through his previous work, and whenever things *had* started going well, his old employer would interfere.

"It's all about putting the right person in the right job," Caph said. "And this job is the right one for me."

"Me too. I thought I'd never be able to make a living."

"But that's no reason to overwork yourself. Looks like you're done eating. Get ready to leave; I'll walk you home."

"But I live right next door..."

Beaule lived on the third floor of the building next door, which functioned like company housing for the Ho Company employees.

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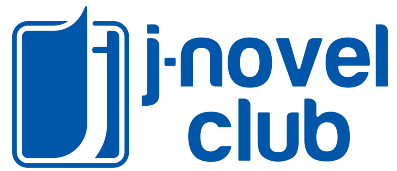
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The Conqueror from a Dying Kingdom: Volume 3

by Fudeorca

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